



FOREWORD BY
Walter Brueggemann

Unfettered

Imagining a Childlike Faith
beyond the Baggage of Western Culture

Mandy Smith

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CHAPTER 1

Rest

Attention is the beginning of devotion.

—Mary Oliver, *Upstream*

With information we are alone;
in appreciation we are with all things.

—Abraham Heschel,
Man Is Not Alone

God does big things.
To us they seem very small.

I'm learning not to despise the day of small things.

My first day of small things was a Tuesday. I was on my first sabbatical. Although I was supposed to be resting, it is hard to break the habit of having an agenda. I knew from experience that reflection often leads to resolution. So without realizing it, my approach to God was, "Well, now that I have your attention, here's my list of problems for you to solve." But God seemed to

have other plans. I wanted a business meeting; God wanted a picnic. His boredom with my questions soon became apparent, so I reluctantly joined the picnic. And while I didn't return to work with answers, I came back with a deeper knowledge that the Source of all Truth was present in a way I hadn't yet known.

If I'm honest, the offer of direct access to Truth the Person was a little deflating. Too nebulous for my taste. I'd rather just be given a set of rules, a system, a formula, an answer, direct access to an encyclopedia in the sky. Truth in the form of subject, verb, object. We don't usually want to be like Pharisees. But we all want to *feel* like Pharisees—standing on solid statements, having a place from which to argue. Given the choice between knowledge and life we prefer knowledge. It's how Adam and Eve chose their fruit. We've been choosing the same fruit ever since.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. My first day of small things took place a week into my pastoral sabbatical—a radical eight weeks of nothing in a world running on everything. I was on my usual morning walk—a daily practice of taking the cap off my overfull heart and mind so the contents could tumble out before God's kind eyes. What emerged on this particular March morning was obsessive wrangling with a troublesome situation that refused to be resolved. For the thousandth time I turned it over, willing it to take a more pleasing shape within my thinking so I could finally file it away. If this issue would just conform to my will I could have the resolution I needed to enjoy this sabbatical. Something on the edge of my awareness drew me outside my own head just in time to spot a flock of geese over the treetops. Their wings beat a breath across all my mental spreadsheets, a breath that made my heart sigh, "I want to fly like that."

Long after they were gone I stood there, breathless from the sudden change in me. For the first time I was aware that geese in formation have no plan to shape a V. Each goose doesn't

measure two inches between its beak and the tail of the goose in front; instead, each goose attends to the art of sensing that slipstream sweet spot. The shoulders of a goose know how to find the space where the wind is kind. And without conscious effort they are flying in a perfect V—a perfect V for a human to behold from beneath on a Tuesday morning. A perfect V to draw her out of her efforts of measuring the inches in front of her own nose in her own desperate efforts at V-making. On that morning my “I want to fly like that” heart sigh became a sea change. I had no idea yet how to fly like that, but I had a feeling it would involve trusting parts of myself I’d ignored for a very long time. I had no idea what I was awakening or how often trusting those instincts would make me feel exactly like a goose in the worst possible way. I couldn’t know then what it might grant me or cost me, but I’ve never forgotten my promise to fly differently. And I’ve never been the same.

I first understood this “I want to fly like that” promise as a nice project for an eight-week sabbatical. Nothing else to do, might as well learn to fly like a goose. On a warm Sunday morning soon after that first goose moment, my family dropped me off at a nearby park while they went on to church without me. In case I’d forgotten my previous promise, a very unsubtle second flock of geese swooped right over my head, reminding me to pay attention to any goose-like instincts that might make themselves known. I was halfway along a particularly long stretch of fence when I realized the fence needed a stick

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What excites you about this invitation to “fly like that”? What makes you hesitate?

dragged along it. The sensible part of me did what it always did—dismissed the prompt as pointless and kept on walking. But the prompt persisted, and so my instinctive self marched my sensible self all the way back to the beginning of that fence to find a stick and begin again, this time to the sound of joyful clacking. I became self-conscious as a stranger passed me, and I wanted to cry, “Can’t you see I’m learning to fly like a goose?! I’m going to drag this stick along this whole fence if it kills me!”

That night I wrote in my journal: “Maybe flying like a goose is about remembering your child self, wearing what you like, resting when you need, being sensitive to your body, and letting yourself follow your senses.”¹ Learning whimsy for eight weeks was a great place to begin. I had no idea that it was just the beginning. Children’s whims sometimes wander into significant things.

Trying to fly like a goose is strange when you don’t have wings. But the metaphor became less strange as I remembered that this had once been my natural process. As children we trust our bodies and senses and emotions as much as we trust our thoughts. It helped to know that I wasn’t learning a new skill but paying attention to parts of me that I had long disregarded. That childlike inclination, once awakened, began to make herself heard more and more. And my arguing with her became less and less heartfelt.

Rest from Running the World

This new permission to listen to childlike instincts was sealed in me by a man I expected to be deeply serious. At the start of a weeklong retreat at Gethsemani Abbey, the orientation talk was given by one of the most winsome, fully human beings I’d met. This eighty-year-old monk, recently come from a day of silence and prayer, embodied the possibility that profound spirituality and childlikeness were not only oddly compatible

but symbiotic. His welcome invited me to sink into the rhythm of this place, and as I did I had a strangely familiar feeling. The monks prepare all meals for retreatants and ring the church bells when it's time for prayer. There was nothing I had to do, nowhere I had to be, no clock I had to watch. Since the retreat house is built into the side of their airy church sanctuary, I almost felt like the boy Samuel living in the temple. At any time I could cross the hallway from my simple room to an ordinary door that opened onto an extraordinary church space, filled somehow with a different kind of air. One night when I couldn't sleep, I heard the bells signaling for Vigils prayer at 3:15 a.m. I took my sleepy self down the hallway to join the monks, already dressed, already prepared for the day. Someone else was up, caring for the sleeping world, and it was just my part to show up and join the prayer, even if still in socked feet. It took me back to childhood mornings, waking to the sound of my mother humming to the kitchen radio while she prepared my breakfast. Was it okay to let someone else run the world again?

Whether I called it flying like a goose or following my child-like instincts, it meant knowing something greater than me was guiding the universe. A wise brother had posted on the bulletin board these words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux: "You will discover things in the woods that you never found in books. Stones and trees will teach you things you never heard from your schoolteachers." So when I spotted a patch of moss and wondered if it was really as soft as it looked, I bent to see for myself (it wasn't). When my feet, tired and dusty in my sandals, heard the sound of running water, I let them find it (and was reminded it was, only last week, ice). When offered cheese made by the monks, I ate it slowly, savoring every bit. Someone else made the moss, melted the ice, aged the cheese. My part was to touch, to splash, to taste. I didn't force gratitude, just chose to receive. To receive air I had not made into lungs I had not

formed. Such receiving revealed grace in everything. Gratitude was inevitable.

The point here is not to force mountaintop experiences but to be present to the marvelous things at work in our ordinary daily experience, to be present to the miracle of God's creation and provision. Write a poem to describe one tiny blade of grass or the color of your mother's hair. Do a sketch of your own fingerprint or your favorite tree. Make recordings of all the local birds or walk your neighborhood to photograph tiny architectural details you usually overlook. Keep a journal by your bed to record your favorite moment of each day. As I write, my favorite green cardigan is on the back of my chair, my dog is snoring, and I can smell coffee brewing. What's happening right around you that is good or lovely? Think on these things.

Whimsy is wonderful. But this is so much more than whimsy. We create caricatures of children—they're either undisciplined terrors or playful sprites. I remembered my own childhood through a sentimental lens until a childlike whim led me to wander into a workshop where Katy Smith, an early childhood educator, shared the very significant leadership lessons she's learned from toddlers. She invited me to set aside my caricatures and to remember my actual experience of childhood. She reminded me that even in a troubled or traumatic childhood, as children we are alive and present and honest. She put it this way:

Toddlers own a room and assume that they are welcome. They're driven by intense curiosity and go for it without over-thinking. Toddlers insist that you shut out all other distractions to be with them, present and purposeful. They feed themselves—their bodies, minds, and souls—without apology. They take care of their needs. Toddlers understand how powerful words are and are not afraid to say the hard things or the joyful things. They will tell you when they are hurting and will look for support. They wear band-aids proudly to remind us all that they are

“God is waiting for human human beings.”

Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life:
The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*

recovering from something that hurt them. Toddlers will let you know when they need to be carried. They ask for grace when they need to be understood and accepted. Toddlers embrace the need to melt down and do not see their emotions as a weakness but as an effective tool to communicate with the people who care for them. Toddlers comfort themselves when they are uncertain, scared, or lonely. They’re not ashamed to need comfort to get through hard times. Toddlers trust in their ability to be at the top of the curly slide. They assume competence and self-correct when they have misjudged a situation.²

When children are tired or sick, they rest—without feeling like failures. When they need help, they ask for it. Children are receptive; their hearts and senses and instincts are always on. And they pay attention to what these parts of them reveal about themselves and the world around them—whether it is hurt feelings or a caterpillar, it is significant and requires investigation. And when children feel prompted by their instincts, they respond with courage. This is what it means to be human, and I want to be more like this (again). This is not a new skill. We’ve been this before.

Healing to Fragmented Selves

Suddenly the Bible said things I’d never noticed before. How had I never seen how whole its characters were? How had I missed how very human their experiences were? Not only did the people in the Bible seem comfortable with their complete

thinking, feeling, sensing human experience but the Bible gloried in the many ways humans express God's whole self. Scripture uses language for soul, spirit, mind, stomach, heart, and breast without our Western need to create hard categories and hierarchies. While the Hebrew and Greek words translated in these ways certainly have their own meanings, their semantic domains overlap—they are at home with one another in ways that make modern, Western, English speakers uncomfortable. When Jesus says we should love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27), he is not creating a taxonomy but describing a kind of engagement that involves our whole selves. Paul regularly disturbs our modern desire to distinguish between mind and heart with passages like "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened" (Eph. 1:18). If we bring our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits to our reading of Scripture, we may come to a more complete understanding than ever before.

Scripture is comfortable with the complex, multifaceted beings we are. It tells stories of humans engaging with their whole selves and a God who engages with his whole self. It is only in recent history that we have become uncomfortable with these parts of Scripture, ourselves, and God. As Rollo May describes it,

The chief characteristic of the last half of the nineteenth century was the breaking up of personality into fragments. These fragmentations . . . were symptoms of the emotional, psychological, and spiritual disintegration occurring in the culture and in the individual. . . . The Victorian man saw himself as segmented into reason, will, and emotions and found the picture good. . . . [The] citizen of the Victorian period so needed to persuade himself of his own rationality that he denied the fact that he had ever been a child or had a child's irrationality and lack of control; hence the radical split between the adult and

the child. . . . Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were keenly aware that the “sickness of soul” of Western man was a deeper and more extensive morbidity than could be explained by the specific individual or social problems. Something was radically wrong in man’s relation to himself.³

John Wesley created a way to bring these parts of ourselves together as we discern how to follow God. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral names four elements to be considered in our discernment: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. While Scripture is the most authoritative, our interpretations of it are not, and we will understand it most faithfully when we bring in the history of our tradition, the voices of others, our God-given reason, and the ways we engage God in our daily experience. Few of us have a balanced approach to these parts of our experience.

As Scripture increasingly began to speak to my entire lived experience, I longed to figure out how to engage Scripture with less shame for those experiences that come as tears or dancing before they can ever be words. I wanted to know how to welcome the ways God begins with songs and dreams and groans. I began to see that my reverence for truth-as-printed-text had kept me from seeing how much Scripture itself tells stories of truth embodied. I began to ask, “What if those parts of myself that I find embarrassing, confusing, annoying, or distasteful are places where God longs to connect with me? What if these are places where God drops a tiny taste of his own longings to

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How have you experienced this segmenting of the self? How have you seen or experienced this “sickness of the soul” as a result?

flavor our ways of knowing? What if on a daily basis I say no to these ways God wants to meet with me and love me?”

As messy as it was, figuring this out was no longer optional. If the presence of God is now expressed on earth in our bodies, and if the world will know the redemption of God through that Spirit’s expression through our words and lives, I needed to know that Spirit within me. If that Spirit doesn’t make hard distinctions between thinking, feeling, and sensing, I wanted to set aside those barren boxes to learn how to partner with this mysterious force at work in me. It was deeply unnerving to press “pause” on my own control and wait on something that may or may not reveal itself and accept that even when it does it still may not make sense. But I decided that discomfort was no reason to avoid the lesson.

Right about now I started to wonder if I was “going charismatic.” I come from a tradition that absolutely positively is pretty sure that miracles are no more and trusts that God reveals himself only through the printed text of the Bible. That represents a kind of prideful certainty that isn’t very Christian. Surprisingly, I find a similar but opposite certainty in some folks who talk about the Spirit all the time—it’s tempting to be absolutely positively pretty sure exactly what God will do and what he’s saying to everyone around us. Both extremes hold their own agendas and seek to retain control, claiming certainty when we should have a reverence for all that could be and all we don’t know. What I began to see in people who really know the Spirit is a daily discernment, a watching and a waiting and a turning over whatever comes their way. It leads them to be humble and self-aware and comfortable with vagueness. It forces a daily conversation with God and Scripture and the community of believers. All of this sounds very slow and messy. And wonderful.

My upbringing and culture have taught me that from the moment I open my eyes each morning, the world is what I make

of it. What this day will be is mine to create, what my work and relationships will be is mine to control. Even if I never say with my mouth “It’s all up to me,” my life had been saying “It’s all up to me” in how I fretted over the things I feel responsible for, in how I was made uncomfortable by every detail of life I couldn’t understand or control. And the amount of energy I devoted to blaming myself when I failed finally made these unspoken beliefs apparent. I began to wonder: “What might it be like every morning to open my eyes to a world already humming along and to wonder how to join in the humming?”

Rest from Deity

The challenge that God presented to the people of Israel was to wake in this way of wonder at least one day out of every seven. Even if our Sabbath keeping is not an entire day, we still need Sabbath. We still need time to figure out how to let God run the world, whether it’s for one minute an hour, one hour a day, or one day a week. There’s a reason God invited the people into Sabbath before he gave them the Law. And there’s a reason God got seriously vexed when the Israelites ignored Sabbath keeping. Sabbath is not just a day off. Sabbath is about life and death. In fact, I’ve heard it said that in Sabbath God invites us to practice for our own death in two ways: to get used to being in God’s presence for the pure sake of it (as we will be in the afterlife) and to learn to trust he can carry the world without us (as he’ll continue to do after we have passed).⁴ Whether or not we devote an entire day out of seven to this practice, in a culture that tempts us to be God we need this kind of sobering rehearsal more than ever. Even if they’re stolen between the “significant” things in life, these moments to step aside and pay attention might release us from the need to be God and let us live as whole humans again. And although it has to begin by setting aside time, a swinging from working to resting, the

more we practice it, the more the rest stays with us even when we're productive. We begin to do our work with an awareness that we're not making this world but joining God in the work of remaking it. The mental, physical, and emotional restoration we gain from resting is only part of the point. The habit helps us rest from our own striving toward deity.

To be so open to God, so aware of my place in the world, and so awake to my own self seemed wonderful but out of reach. Once I became convicted of how much I'd been striving in my own strength, I wanted to change. But how could I remake myself into this new self? Surely it would take years to accomplish this reconstruction work! That self-starter compulsion runs deep. The child in me posed a new possibility: "What if this is an invitation to even set aside the habit of making yourself?" I suddenly found that I had what I'd needed all along. There's a slumbering child in each of us who knows these ways to not be

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While you may not have total control over your ability to rest, especially if your work places certain demands on you, what do you do with the time you can control? Even in your "rest" do you stay in a productivity rut? Or maybe you only value rest in its ability to make you more productive when you return to work.

Stuart Brown, director of the National Institute for Play, lists eight Play Personalities: The Joker, The Kinesthete, The Explorer, The Competitor, The Director, The Collector, The Artist/Creator, and The Storyteller.⁵ Which of these describes your play as a child? Even children with unhappy childhoods had moments to themselves to direct their own lives. How did you spend that time? What would it look like for the adult version of you to reawaken your play personality?

God. As I let her rub the sleep from her eyes, she began to show me that being in God's presence for the sake of it and letting God carry the world would not feel so much like death after all. That if there were ways God wanted me to grow, he could allow those to unfold over my entire life. It wasn't my job to remake myself but to say yes to how he wanted to remake me.

It began in slow, sleepy ways; in still, small voices; in tiny, unspeakable urges that I'd belittled and ignored. The world that told me life is entirely what I make of it had no time for these foolish feelings and prompts. But this was a moment to embrace "small" things. It began with giving my ears the time to alight on every note in a bird song before I launched out of bed and into "big, important" things. It began with lingering to savor the smell of warm skin, with paying attention to a Bible word that snagged on my heart. A tabletop suggested its grain needed my touch. The sky needed me to pull out of traffic for two minutes to watch how it ended the day. A thousand worms marooned on a rainy driveway needed to be saved, slowly, with a stick and great care. They needed it so much and for so long that I didn't even notice the snickering of onlookers.

Loving as a Way to Know

This kind of openness and responsiveness transformed my entire way of engaging with the world. It taught me to value input before I could explain why it was valuable and opened my eyes to truth beyond the things I thought I understood. It was an expansive landscape but the same openness that made anything possible in all the best ways, made anything possible in all the worst ways. Would this new way of being cause me to lose friends and respect? My exhilaration at new possibilities was tainted by fear and loneliness. It was perfect timing for finding a new friend, the wise and gentle Christian epistemologist Esther Lightcap Meek. She has a name for what I was beginning to

do. She calls it “Loving to Know,” and it has given me permission to approach life as an adult who is as open as a child. She writes, “Reality is not such that we can exhaust it. Reality is continuously dynamic, ever-new gift. It harbors mystery and surprise, always. But we and it are meant to trust each other and thrive in that trust. This is the joy of communion. And while life and knowing is often thwarted and broken and difficult, we still have a choice how to view it as we set about knowing. Choosing dancing toward communion invites the real. It makes us better knowers even as it makes us better lovers.”⁶

To love in order to know, we have to welcome two kinds of input: primary and subsidiary. Primary input is what is at the center of our attention while subsidiary input comes from awareness of who is around us, the things our bodies are sensing, what is going on in our surroundings. These are ways of learning that we knew and trusted as children. They’re not in conflict with focal things, and we can add them without setting aside what our education and experience have taught us. I began to discover that I could engage as a whole being by bringing all these pieces together and being open to a God who speaks through Scripture, music, conversation, ideas, feelings, instincts, intellect, nature, and bodily experience. It began to awaken parts of me lying dormant. It began to reveal a God much more multidimensional than I ever knew.

This permission to engage with my whole self made me want to revisit Jesus’s ways of talking about children. I’d often seen his comments about children as soft-focus, throwaway sentiments. It is easy to imagine that Jesus just chose to use the ragamuffins milling about to gather the crowd’s attention since the kids’ antics were already causing a distraction. It’s tempting to take the passing nature of his comments about children as a sign of their insignificance. And yet his brief statements may take the rest of our lives to fathom.

Just before he mentions the children in Luke 18, Jesus has been telling the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. While it's in the form of a parable, we can easily imagine the scene unfolding as Jesus speaks. Jesus describes two men going to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee—an insider, the apparent good guy—and the other a despised tax collector. And yet Jesus is unimpressed with the prayers of the Pharisee, who is so convinced of his own completeness that there's no need for God (except to thank God that he is not like the tax collector nearby). Meanwhile, the tax collector, unaware of the Pharisee's scorn, pours out his heart to God from a profound awareness of his reliance on the Lord's mercy. What is happening in the heart of the tax collector that is not happening in the heart of the Pharisee? What allows the tax collector to be so responsive?

What a surprising story in which the Pharisee with all his religious learning has become the object of reproach while the tax collector is the unlikely hero. Luke provides some insight, explaining that Jesus told this parable “for some who trusted in themselves.” Perhaps those self-assured folks are still within hearing when Jesus then turns to the children clambering onto his lap and the lesson continues. When the disciples try to shoo away the children, Jesus says what could be one of his most significant yet least considered statements:

Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. (Luke 18:16–17)

We may sigh, “Aww, how nice. Jesus likes the little kiddies,” and promptly move on to more important passages that can be built up into more serious theologies. Children are cute and all, but you really want us to be like that, Jesus? Don't you know, Jesus, that children are small and unruly, weak and uninformed?

We have important things to do because other people are counting on us. So we read this passage in passing. We miss his joyful, weighty invitation. What if it really is true that we cannot receive or enter God's kingdom unless we are like a child? If it were true, and we really wanted God, wouldn't we spend a little more energy exploring this strange but very clear statement? Like Nicodemus, wouldn't we ask with real urgency, "How can someone be a child when they're grown? Surely we can't turn back the clock!" What if a thorough, courageous investigation of this conundrum might take us another way to the place we are so desperately trying to find? I've devoted the rest of my life to the exploration of these questions.

The only thing Jesus really talked about was God's kingdom—the place where a reign of peace is possible. He invited humans, fettered by reigns of domination, discord, and scarcity, to imagine a possibility of power without abuse. It seems to me that if we really longed for such a place, we'd hang on every instruction Jesus gave for how to get there. He did give a clear instruction: be like a child. But that's just asking too much (or perhaps too little?). The invitation to become like children is so preposterous that we dismiss it without a thought. Being a child is never the way to important things. So we ignore Jesus's way and set about finding our own way into the kingdom, which amounts to taking the kingdom by force. Although we want a place without the abuse of power, we work to get there through abuse of our own small power. Our well-intentioned pursuit of God becomes a hunt. Our honest desire to partake of God becomes consumption. Our attempts to grasp him turn into domination. We're surprised when all our efforts fall flat—God just seems powerless and his kingdom feels like a farce—because *how* we do things cannot be separated from what we're trying to do.

What if the door to the kingdom is so small that all our efforts to puff ourselves up to be good enough to enter actually disqualify us instead? Perhaps the door is the eye of a needle

for everyone. The question is whether we'll continue to persist in being camels. Immediately after Jesus invites his hearers to receive the kingdom like a child, a wealthy man asks how to enter the kingdom. Jesus offers this ridiculous image of a large beast squeezing through a tiny space, hard enough to thread with even just one camel's hair. Is Jesus asking us to submit to what will feel like cruel surgery? Is he saying that we can enter only by amputating essential parts of ourselves? Or is he releasing us from our habits of being something we were never meant to be? When we have been freed of our self-sufficiency, our habits of "fix, control, comprehend," we will find ourselves small enough to enter and empty enough to receive. When we have repented of both our deflated inactivity and our puffed-up overactivity we will remember how to engage as collaborators again. If we take the risk to do it the way Jesus says—by being like children—the pure discomfort of it will remake us into kingdom dwellers. The kingdom is already here. We may need to be transformed to enter it.

This is the posture that God has invited us into throughout the history of his engagement with humans. He longed for Israel to enter this relationship as his children. They preferred legalism, power, foreign gods—all more satisfying than entering into love as recipients. When they had stoned every prophet who called them back to God's heart, he entered the world to model how he longs for us to approach him. Jesus knows his need for the Father, acknowledges his reliance on the Father, seeks the Father's comfort and guidance, and gives the Father credit for the power. He was a true human, more human than we dare to be. And if we choose not to be ashamed of Jesus's childlikeness toward the Father, we too find the capacity to become small enough to be children of God.

This humility, this childlikeness, is both simple and impossible. Jesus says so himself. No amount of cleverness or resourcefulness or sheer force on a camel's part will squeeze

it through the eye of a needle. For good reason the disciples respond with exasperation: “Then who can be saved?” (Luke 18:26). But Jesus defies their desire for an easy resolution by answering the question he wishes they’d asked, inviting them to consider who God is instead of who they are not: “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (18:27).

We would rather be given action steps than be asked to rely on God. Compared to the ridiculous effort of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, childlikeness could feel like relief from anxious striving. But to those accustomed to their own efforts, more often it feels like a cruel conundrum. We ricochet between “It’s all up to God” and “It’s all up to me,” neither of which actually requires much engagement with God. Our work is not to be strong and smart enough but to stop working so hard. And, at the same time, our work is not to delegate all responsibility to God. Total passivity or total self-reliance are not our only options. Our part is to release our tight grip on this life we think is ours, keeping our hands open to receive back whatever he decides is our part, every day. Will we allow him to make us small enough to enter the kingdom? And once in the kingdom, will we be willing to grow into the fullness of our calling as “a kingdom and priests to serve” him, to “reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:10)?

Jesus’s Childlikeness

We know how to live as though “It’s all up to God” or “It’s all up to me.” What is harder to imagine is this third way. Thankfully, we don’t have to only imagine it since we have a model in Jesus’s own childlikeness toward the Father. In his sermon “The Child in the Midst,” George MacDonald explores why Jesus had such high regard for the way of children: “To receive a child in the name of Jesus is to receive Jesus; to receive Jesus is to receive God; therefore to receive the child is to receive God himself.”⁷ What a wonderful invitation: to learn childlike

humility from a God who is not only willing to welcome children but also willing even to become a child.

If we watch closely how Jesus is like a child toward the Father, we may understand what Jesus is asking of us. In one of the few books that examine Jesus's call to childlikeness, Hans Urs von Balthasar takes time to describe the four traits of childlikeness that are evident in Jesus.⁸ As we imagine this whole being Balthasar paints, we see how relationship between God and human beings is possible again.

First, *Jesus knows his place and receives it with peace*. His trust in the goodness of the Father leads Jesus to live in deference to him: "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:19–20). While this is a posture of humility, it is not one of humiliation. Jesus empties himself of all for the Father, trusting that the Father will also fill. It is nothing less than love freely given and freely received in pure openness.

Second, *Jesus's essential stance toward the Father is thanksgiving*. His awareness of his need for the Father makes him always grateful for the Father's provision, always reliant on him, and always ready to give to others. "Because he is needy he is also thankful in his deepest being. . . . To be a child means to owe one's existence to another, and even in our adult life we never quite reach the point where we no longer have to give thanks for being the person we are."⁹ From Jesus's gratitude and sense of need grows his deep generosity.

Third, *Jesus not only approaches the Father in humility and gratitude, he knows the intimacy he shares with all children of God, his brothers and sisters*. He is able to guide and teach others while also being in submission to the Father, remembering what it means both to be obeyed and to obey. He sees himself as a child of the Father without losing sight of the broader

family to which he belongs—I in thee and thee in me and us in them and them in us (John 17:21–22).

And finally, *Jesus is at peace with the limitations of time and so lives in the fullness of the moment*. He is fully alive, attentive to the work of the Father and the needs of his brothers and sisters. His submission to this kind of childlikeness allows him to be fully human: “The child has time to take time as it comes, one day at a time, calmly, without advance planning or greedy hoarding of time. Time to play, time to sleep. . . . Play is possible only within time so conceived, and also the unresisting welcome we give to sleep. And only with time of this quality can the Christian find God in all things, just as Christ found the Father in all things.”¹⁰

Jesus seems to be at peace with being childlike. We don’t always experience that peace. One thing I learned when I started talking about childlikeness is how often people want to clarify, “But mind you’re not *childish*.” We are more attentive to Paul’s mention of putting away childish things than we are to Jesus’s instruction to become like children. (As we will see, the two can coexist.) As much as this invitation toward childlikeness drew me in, there was serious internal and external resistance. I didn’t yet know the difference between childlikeness and childishness, but I knew Jesus knew it. He reveals to us the beauty of a life lived, knowing how we fit into the broader whole—in harmony with the Father and with one another. He feels no need to selfishly withdraw in childish ways or to force himself on others in adultish ways. He can hover in a space of needing and being needed, of serving and being served, knowing and living within his limitations. He does not even feverishly work at making himself more childlike. He is a human at peace. A true self.

In describing Jesus’s own childlikeness, Balthasar gives us a clearer path to follow as we try to respond well to Jesus’s call to childlikeness. As we see every story of Jesus through this

lens, it's easier to imagine Jesus's kind of humility, gratitude, relational intimacy, and attentiveness. Balthasar's picture of Jesus makes me want to live like that. But sadly, I'm left where Christian study often leads me: working hard to make myself like Jesus. My Western performance habits are triggered by Balthasar's list of attributes, and I'm sent right back to where I started—engaging adultish ego to make myself more childlike. As helpful as books are, Jesus doesn't say "*think* about being like a child" but "*be* like a child." All our well-intentioned efforts keep us busy at the door to the kingdom. All our work to attain childlikeness does not help us to actually enter.

There are things we won't learn about Jesus's invitation until we embrace how we learned and lived as children. This hopeful new possibility is raised by The Child Theology Movement. This new conversation, growing from a Malaysian gathering of Christian practitioners and theologians, asks: "As Jesus did something highly significant with a child in Matthew 18, as children make up about half the world's population, as they are the most oppressed social group and as we all are or have been children, isn't it time that we brought this perspective to bear on our understanding of what is meant by 'the kingdom of God' and how we are to live in God's way?"¹¹ Those involved in this hopeful new movement ask us to reconsider our very way of thinking about theology. They propose that we might learn something about the kingdom not only by studying how to be more childlike from a posture of adulthood (which usually studies from a safe distance, pretending to be objective) but also by truly being like them. "The child is capable of breaking through our theologies and habits of mind. . . . Jesus places the child in the midst of an argument about greatness in the kingdom of God, expecting the child to make a crucial difference to the argument."¹²

If Jesus really meant that we need to be like children to enter the kingdom, then that deserves serious attention. And we give

serious attention in the way adults do: we shoo the children from the room and set aside our bodily needs and emotional whims so we can engage without interruption (albeit with only a small part of ourselves). Egos and intellects are welcome. They help us dissect and debate. They make us feel objective and strong. But when Jesus's disciples started in that direction, he refused to be wrapped up in it. He disrupted their whole way of engaging not by presenting a perfectly worded treatise but by simply plopping a messy, curious little being right into the middle of their debate. Any treatise would have only perpetuated their existing worldview; instead, Jesus turns a soft eye toward a small person, opening a window to an entirely new world.

What might we learn by bringing childlikeness in its natural state to the center of the conversation? What might our own childlike questions, interests, and values bring to our understanding of God? Is it okay to welcome these parts of ourselves? Considering the possibility seems both ridiculous and too good to be true. Becoming like children is not regression. To be like children is to be human again: awake to the whole experience of dwelling in bodies and in the world and unsurprised that we are incomplete and attuned to our need for something beyond ourselves.

Thomas Merton is, for me, one of the greatest examples of a truly human Christian thinker—a man whose rigorous theological inquiry meant bringing all he was. One of his most important works ends with this observation:

What is serious to men is often very trivial in the sight of God. What in God might appear to us as “play” is perhaps what He Himself takes most seriously. At any rate the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. . . . We are invited to forget

ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.¹³

I wonder if Merton had learned these lessons in the same Abbey woods that had been teaching me. It wasn't hard to imagine he'd cast his solemnity to the same winds.

It's no coincidence that I was finding friends in monks. While these approaches seemed new and strange to me, the contemplative tradition has been exploring them for centuries. And the more I learn about these seemingly lofty practices of contemplation, the more I see that those who are really "good" at it are so because they have learned to stop trying so hard to be good at it. They are grounded, human, attentive, receptive—childlike. James Finley describes the ways he was trained in contemplation by Merton himself: "Here's a first indication of what it means to live a contemplative way of life: It is to have a faith that our own heart in its most childlike hour did not deceive us."¹⁴ Merton models this way of life so well because he embodies many things that seem to be in conflict: an artist and scholar, a thinker and feeler, a writer and a romantic, a man of action who knew how to need God, a world-changer who had not forgotten how to wander in the woods. And so, as a responsible adult, learning to respond as a child, I need his words: "Contemplation is . . . life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is

FIELD GUIDE

What about this invitation makes you hesitate? What excites you? What is in conflict in you as you imagine what it might mean to engage with God and one another as whole beings?

spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. . . . [Contemplation] is a pure and a virginal knowledge, poor in concepts, poorer still in reasoning, but able, by its very poverty, and purity, to follow the Word wherever He may go.”¹⁵

Merton proposes a new possibility that feels too good to be true. When first venturing into this exploration of childlikeness, I’d imagined a Grown-Up God releasing me to go and play: “You go explore the world while I run it without you for a while.” What I was surprised to find, after being given leave by Sustainer God, was Delighter God, at play in his own creation, inviting me to join. I had not expected that this whimsical “waste of time” might lead me into deeper communion with no less than the Creator of all things. G. K. Chesterton paints the picture of a God who is not too important to enjoy his own work.

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.¹⁶

We find ourselves with a choice to make: Do we do what we’ve always done and get the same, sad outcomes? Or do we rest from our efforts at “making reality” and truly engage the Reality already surging in and around us? The challenge is not

to attain some new skill or knowledge but to abandon our habit of attaining and to remember old ways we knew as children, which our Christian forebears knew and are still practiced by Christian adults in other traditions and cultures. If our culture, our upbringing, our education, our socialization, and the media all shape us into makers and doers, strivers and achievers, this childlike posture will be strange. As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, “It may be that this Christian requirement to keep our divine childlikeness alive in all areas of our existence becomes more difficult the more technical man seeks to shape and govern everything on his own.”¹⁷ More difficult, yes, but not impossible when Reality within us constantly urges us to engage Reality all around us.

I cannot express how strange and terrifying this was. But I’d caught a glimpse of something that seemed worth the risk. To name what I was embracing, I wrote a kind of covenant. I offer it here as a summary but also as an invitation for you to embrace it with me (or write your own).

I choose to pay attention to the small things that are calling for my attention, even when I’m trying to do big things.

I choose to trust that these small things can find me in moments when I actually have a minute to give (even if I don’t feel like I do), and I choose to trust that my life will not fall to pieces if I stop for a moment to pay attention.

I choose to listen to my senses, my emotions, my instincts, to engage the world with my whole self.

I will not force these moments to arrive on my time or to mean what I want them to mean. I choose to set aside my striving for “big” things and choose to attend to the small, kingdom things in small, kingdom ways.

I trust that real things are hidden in surprising places, even
if others around me don't see it.

I trust that Reality is at work all around and within me,
waiting for me to join it.

I choose to forget myself. On purpose.

And join in the general dance.

Creed

I believe in the life of the word,
the diplomacy of food. I believe in salt-thick,
ancient seas and the absoluteness of blue.
A poem is an ark, a suitcase in which to pack
the universe—I believe in the universality
of art, of human thirst
for a place. I believe in Adam's work
of naming breath and weather—all manner
of wind and stillness, humidity
and heat. I believe in the audacity
of light, the patience of cedars,
the innocence of weeds. I believe
in apologies, soliloquies, speaking
in tongues; the underwater
operas of whales, the secret
prayer rituals of bees. As for miracles—
the perfection of cells, the integrity
of wings—I believe. Bones
know the dust from which they come;
all music spins through space on just
a breath. I believe in that grand economy
of love that counts the tiny death
of every fern and white-tailed fox.

I believe in the healing ministry
of phlox, the holy brokenness of saints,
the fortuity of faults—of making
and then redeeming mistakes. Who dares
brush off the auguries of a storm, disdain
the lilting eulogies of the moon? To dance
is nothing less than an act of faith
in what the prophets sang. I believe
in the genius of children and the goodness
of sleep, the eternal impulse to create. For love
of God and the human race, I believe
in the elegance of insects, the imminence
of winter, the free enterprise of grace.

Abigail Carroll, *Habitation of Wonder*
(Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 115–16.

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