

BOOK REVIEWS

Courtney Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning into God's New Creation*, Horizons in Religious Education Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 184 pp.

Courtney Goto offers an approach to religious education for adults that places the notion of “play” in a central position as a means to involve people in a process of “revelatory experiencing” the divine in relational contexts. As Goto asserts: “*Revelatory experiencing causes in learners a destabilizing and re-orienting shift in awareness or feeling that allows them to encounter divine mystery, themselves, and others in new, life-giving ways*” (p. 3). The aim of such revelatory experiencing is always towards a more just and peaceful world. To guide the reader in exploring ways to understand and engage the “grace of playing,” the book is divided into six chapters.

Chapters 2 through 5 address specific pedagogical approaches to engaging learners in revelatory experiencing. Chapter 2 draws upon social science knowledge, particularly Winnicott’s notions of a “good enough” mother, holding environments, and transitional objects and phenomena. Later, Goto incorporates these concepts into contemporary religious settings. Chapter 3 introduces a theological lens, drawing particularly on the early work of Jürgen Moltmann on play and his later work on Spirit, as a means to further interpret notions of imagination, particularly as related to creating experiences of counter-environments, environments of more

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just and humane relationships. In chapter 4 she moves into a historical overview of how play has been experienced and portrayed in historical contexts of the Christian faith. She provides an in-depth view for the role of dolls for the religious sisters in the Rheinland, Germany. In contrast to this more private setting of the sisters, she addresses the antics of the fools in public spheres. She is careful to make a distinction between the role of fools and that of jesters. Fools created and lived in a world “as if” they were Christ, calling people to a more godly way of life, whereas jesters served in clerical contexts of medieval Europe to mock the proud and the corrupt. Chapter 5 introduces a fourth angle of vision, the aesthetic dimension of play. This involves the imagistic, affective, and sensual aspects of play. Throughout, she is careful to use each of these four orientations in a way to complement and correct each other toward a fuller understanding of what is involved in play as revelatory experiencing. Without collapsing one orientation into another, she is able to highlight each contribution for an understanding of what it means to engage learners in play toward a revelatory experiencing that encourages authentic selves in relationship to their particular contexts.

Goto offers two particularly poignant examples of what she is proposing in this work. One involves a Japanese American church that created a “play garden” inside their church to enhance their understanding of their physical garden in their courtyard. This involved participatory artwork, liturgical participation, and sermons that related to the project. Through their process they were able to move more deeply into their understanding of who they were as a worshiping community and to address wounds of conflict that had hindered their life together. This experience of revelatory experiencing became a pivotal experience for this congregation, helping them move forward in some fresh ways where they could re-experience themselves as children of God in light of what they participated in together.

The other example involves the improvisational work of Masankho Banda, a performance artist, healer, and teacher who created songs for estranged youth on the streets of the Mission District in San Francisco, California. He composed songs and sang them to the young men, both surprising them and decentering them, with the hope that playing with them might create some kind of awakening or opening to love and the divine.

As Courtney Goto says, “The truth of one’s life cannot be sought directly by reason and logical deduction alone, but indirectly by ‘losing it’ in playing with it. By becoming lost in the upside-down, surprising world of play for the sake of faith, it is possible to entertain what seems impossible” (p. 81), playing at/in God’s new creation. This play is holy play and is only entered into for love’s sake. As Goto asserts, “*Love is the basis for God and humans playing together*” (p. 53).

This volume offers religious educators, supervisors, and various other participants a valuable tool for re-imagining what adult education can provide for people hungry for meaningful discipleship. This is indeed a fresh, creative, and needed invitation to holistic faith formation!

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