To Become Like a Child

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The concept of “the child” has enthralled me for almost eight decades. Partly that’s because my home was always full of children. But also because, as I will argue in a forthcoming book, something of the child remains—or should remain—in all of us. An epigraph for my book could be Matthew 18:3: “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” A character in Georges Bernanos’s Diary of a Country Priest calls those words “some of the most terrible ever heard by human ears.”

Lately I have been able to pursue some philosophical and ethical aspects of the being of the child. The Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University asked me to join a team studying “The Child in Religion, Law, and Society.” The project emerged after John Witte had led the center in a three-year study on “Marriage, Sexuality, and the Family.” Its sessions often ended with the question: “What does this mean for children?” So I commuted to Atlanta and met with 19 Emory faculty in seminars and workshops on the topic of the child. I learned much from then, and will learn more as they publish their findings.

The theme of my book is the mystery of the child, and the subtitle will be “A Celebration of Wonder.” Philosopher Gabriel Marcel offered a distinction that guides my work. On the one hand are problems—in the case of children, the problems are things like bad housing, neglect, abuse, delinquency. Problems, Marcel said, admit of solutions. We may or may not reach them, but to state that something is a problem is to project a search for solutions. Thank God for problem-addressers and problem-solvers.

Mysteries, on the other hand, says Marcel, are not to be solved but to be probed, plumbed, divined; they inspire awe and wonder. To say this in respect to the child is not to idolize the child; there’s enough obeisance to children going around these days. It is to open the door to fresh inquiries.

A question I regularly posed to colleagues at Emory: “We have so many accounts of ‘bad kids’ or kids doing bad things. But shouldn’t we also ask “where do the good kids come from?” and what produces kids who do good things? There are such children and such agencies of good.
Aha! At once we have to ask: “What do you mean by ‘good’?” Nice? Nontroublesome? Compliant? Eager to please? Soon we are discussing Jesus and Aristotle and “the good,” while the child, in mystery, keeps eluding us. Marcel says that one can get distance on a problem and lay siege to it. But one cannot separate oneself from a mystery which concerns us.

What did Jesus, what did the philosophers and theologians—Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar are key figures in my book—point to when they focused on the child and even made the child the exemplar? Were they pointing to the child’s innocence? If you said that, you guessed wrong. The mystery of the child finds the child participating in evil, as parents and teachers, pastors and counselors and officers of the law well know.

More frequently, among the authors I’ve been studying, the accent is on themes such as “openness,” “receptivity,” “expectation.” And those themes lead them, and now me, to focus on subjects such as “Imagination,” “Wonder,” “Creativity,” “Play” and “Trust.”

Projects and books, one teacher told me, always are “agin” something or other. Mine is against what philosopher Jerome Miller calls “the impulse to control,” in this case, to control the child, whether benignly or tyrannically. And it is also against forms of reduction which insist that the child is “nothing but” this or that—nothing but a genetic package, an autistic person, a material object controlled by neuron-firings in the brain.

My last chapter will seem to be cheating, some might prejudge, since it talks about imagination, wonder, creativity, play and trust among people of any age, including octogenarians. That chapter will not be autobiographical. Call it a witness.

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