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“Holding Lightly”: Cultivating Playfulness in Youthⁱ By Courtney Goto and Lakisha Lockhart

Abstract: Given the dynamic, multiple transitions that adolescents experience, we argue that caring adults in church can and should provide supportive environments that enable youth to practice playfulness with the push/pull of anxiety and joy, building on Tillichian view of the human condition. Being playful is a relational, spiritual practice of approaching the world by holding lightly ideas, people, or situations. Drawing on the work of play theorists and youth ministry literature, this chapter reflects on the nature of playfulness, its complex relationships to joy, and its potential to help youth negotiate the challenges of everyday life, reflect on deep questions, and strengthen relationships with themselves, others, and God. We argue that the foundation of playfulness is love that makes hope and faith possible. We offer four practices for cultivating playfulness in youth, providing numerous examples from youth ministry.

Keywords: play; youth education; Winnicott

Introduction

Young people are like molting lobsters.ⁱⁱ In order to grow and thrive, they must periodically wiggle and struggle out of their shell, turning what was inside out. They push, pull, and strain against the internal and external pressures of adolescence, undergoing multiple, dynamic transitions in order to be and become their future selves. They wiggle within the constraints of parental fears and need for control. They struggle to cope with their own anxieties about life, grades, friends, God, bullying, and sexuality. The “lobsters” shed truths of their younger selves, making discoveries about themselves and the world that challenge what they’ve known, which is both scary and exciting. Even as young people experience maturation (the hardening of their shell) in some aspects of their lives, there are always other parts in transition (molting) with the prospect making more developmental shifts, a process that provokes a multitude of feelings.

Many of the emotions that young people experience in the molting process are related to either anxiety on the one hand, or joy on the other. In terms of the former, young people feel vulnerable because their shells are not yet hard in one or another aspect of their lives. Molting requires a lobster to pull its eyes out of its sockets, causing the lobster to be

temporarily blind. The lobster is defenseless until its new shell hardens and its eyes re-adjust. However, even in this vulnerable state, there are also moments of elation, peace, and excitement in which joy could also be known.

Because young people molt regardless of what adults do or fail to do, a key question emerges: How do we as church provide them with supportive environments during their transformation? Although we want to protect them, love them, and promote their flourishing, knowing how to “handle” young people at any given moment is difficult since they are in multiple transitions. Hold them too tightly and the lobsters are bound to rebel, resenting the feeling of being constrained, over-protected, and/or pre-determined. Hold them too loosely and they are liable to feel unseen or untended, as if they are alone.

We believe that adults in church communities must provide conducive environments in which to molt by holding them lightly as they live a full range of experiences. *If they experience being held in the midst of transitions, we argue, young people can practice playfulness, holding lightly all of life’s emotions and experiences associated with anxiety as well as with joy.*

To address *either* anxiety or joy to the exclusion of the other is problematic. On one hand, there is danger in focusing too singularly on adolescent joy in our eagerness to see them thrive. For example, it might seem reasonable or even natural to advocate for Christian young people to be more playful, hoping it will “enhance” their joy.ⁱⁱⁱ However, focusing exclusively on adolescent joy risks being out of touch with the range of emotions, negative as well as positive, that arise in molting. Focusing so narrowly also runs the risk of appearing to legislate how one is supposed to feel and respond, imposing a foreign standard to and other than what they are likely experiencing.^{iv} On the other hand, there is a liability in being so preoccupied with the angst and anxiety of youth that we ignore their experiences of and their capacity for joy.^v In this vein, contributors to this volume aim to take seriously the joy that young people experience precisely because it is easily overlooked.

Anxiety and joy are not merely two emotions among the many that human beings experience. Rather, taken together, they reflect something basic to the human condition. Drawing on the work of Paul Tillich, we propose that the human condition be approached in conjunction with the *polarity* of anxiety and joy. We live in the tension of these elemental registrations of being human. Given this approach, we must take seriously joy, but we must not regard it in isolation, but always in conjunction with anxiety.

In reality, there is both anxiety and joy in molting for young people (as is true for us all since we never stop molting). In molting, there is the fear of leaving behind the safety of one's armor—habits, assumptions, and beliefs—as life challenges a person to grow beyond former truths. However, in molting there is also the joy of discovering and becoming someone one has not been and seeing the world anew.

Because the tension of anxiety and joy is inherent in the human condition and therefore inescapable, adults and youth need to practice playfulness in the face of both. When young people are feeling overwhelmed, endangered, or enraged and they lose sight of their capacity to experience joy, caring adults can hold youth lightly. By this we mean, being gentle with them and respecting their experiences, while enacting the possibility of joy as something also to be known.

This chapter proceeds in a series of steps. First, we explore playfulness as holding lightly, a spiritual practice that is both purposeful and necessary for the molting of youth. We propose complex relationships, in which joy is at times involved in experiencing playfulness (correlational) but in which playfulness is not simply an instrument or precipitant of joy (causal). Second, we show how playfulness helps young people negotiate the challenges of everyday life, reflect on deep questions, and strengthen relationships with themselves, others, and God. Third, we open up some of the theological possibilities of playfulness. Fourth, we identify four practices to help ministers, educators, and young people create spaces where youth can feel held while cultivating habits of playfulness.

As authors, we bring to this chapter perspectives that reflect our research, teaching, and respective faith journeys in/through play(ing).^{vi} We are women of color who have become more fully ourselves through playing in church communities and beyond. Having each experienced multiple types of oppression, we are sensitive to the marginalization of young people yet have found hope (as well as joy) in playing fully.

What is Playfulness and its Relationships to Joy?

First, it is important to recognize that playfulness is so commonplace that we often take for granted what it means, how it happens, and what it creates. In order to see afresh what is familiar, recall a time when you were a young person, thinking or acting in a way that you would consider playful. Where were you? Whom were you with or whom did you have in your heart? What were you doing? How did you feel? Notice that *where* one is playing

and with *whom* matters. We (human beings) can't just play with anyone and under any circumstances. Notice that experiences of playfulness are whole-bodied. One cannot think or act playfully without also *feeling* playful. Each of us knows playfulness perhaps more by feel than by words, more as a spontaneous response to everyday life rather than as a spiritual practice.

Most definitions associate the word “playful” with amusement,^{vii} which is a narrow understanding that does not account for the intricacies and broadness of play(ing), which goes beyond simply “fun.” Defining playfulness more broadly will help us keep in mind the close kinship with play(ing) and with an eye for theological possibilities. *Being playful is a relational, spiritual practice of approaching the world by holding lightly ideas, people, or situations.*^{viii}

If you think back to your own youthful experience of playfulness, consider the possibility that how you were engaging the moment was a choice—either a conscious or an unconscious decision that allowed you to alter how you were engaging the moment. In general, thinking, feeling, or acting playful involves approaching life by holding lightly. “Holding lightly” means engaging the other (be it a person, feeling, idea) with *openness* to what is emerging in the encounter, with *attentiveness* to creating freely in the moment, and with *care* and *respect* for the other.^{ix} In practicing gentle openness, people commit to resisting the temptation to quash, pre-determine, or misuse the other.

Being playful in the narrow sense is intimately related to the broader sense of playing fully, though playing is a more complex social practice and experience. Thinking, feeling, or acting playfully is a particular mode of play(ing), which is itself a way of being with and for others that can involve a wide range of experiencing that is potentially transformative. A helpful way of thinking about playing is this: *To play is to experience losing and finding oneself in engaging reality and one another “as if,” exploring freely a world of possibilities bounded by structure that facilitates relationship.* For example, in role playing, a learner acts “as if” to explore a new way of approaching a situation.^x Acting “as if” is essential to playing, but in a sense being playful takes acting “as if” a step further. In being playful, we luxuriate in the excitement of constantly changing conditions to experiment with what is possible, for example, acting as if X were one thing, then another, then another. In other words, we practice holding lightly by freely acting as-if in letting go. When we are playful, we are en-vision-ing, perhaps trying to imagine and enact something more beautiful, lovely, good, and right.

From theories of playing, we understand that playfulness happens within the context

of relationships. Remember how we noticed that we can be playful with some people, and not with others.^{xi} In fact, holding lightly is only possible because of being held, which by definition requires the participation of others.^{xii} Recall the image of yourself as a young person and the need for someone to hold you lightly—to see you, to be gentle with you, and to help you see more possibilities than you could see alone. Feel the power of a space in which we are with someone who is there with and for us. People help us to be playful.

Third, we need a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between playfulness and joy, rather than reducing the former to a means to experience more of the latter. However, to do this we first must clarify the tension between anxiety and joy. As stated earlier, we are offering the proposal to consider the human condition in conjunction with the polarity between these two.

From Tillich, we understand that anxiety is basic to being human because we are subject to inescapable limitations (what he calls “finitude”).^{xiii} Every person dies. Every one of us is infinitesimally small and subject to the vastness of the universe, most of which we do not know or understand. Overwhelmed by finitude, human beings are bound to experience anxiety (and therefore why we need faith in God). Tillich writes, “Anxiety is self-awareness of the finite self [felt from the ‘inside’] as finite.”^{xiv} In other words, *finitude felt from inside is anxiety*. However, anxiety is neither the end nor the sum total of being human. Just as Christians believe that death does not have victory over us, joy is on the other side of the equation that describes human be-ing. Despite the suffering we face in life, we are promised the joy of resurrection and Christ’s return. Earthly joy is a foretaste of God’s New Creation. In short, *kin(g)dom felt from inside is joy*.^{xv}

Neither anxiety nor joy are simply emotions that we register when triggered by everyday life, but rather they are ever-present elements like oxygen and carbon-dioxide in the air we breathe. One can focus on an inhale or an exhale, becoming conscious of one or the other—much like we can become aware of anxiety or joy being provoked by illness, accident, or the birth of a child, for example. However, we also experience anxiety and joy as abiding, elemental, and non-specific. We know anxiety like a suffocating blanket of carbon dioxide that the earth cannot escape. While we might manage to ignore it or distract ourselves from it temporarily, the effects of global warming constantly remind us of its presence. Similarly, there is individual and collective malaise of which we can be muted or deflected but never goes away. However, we also know joy as oxygen. If we are lucky, life

(and hopefully church) has taught us to depend on the possibilities of joy, much like we have come to rely on a ready supply of oxygen from a lifetime of breathing, especially when others have had to supply oxygen to us. We know the relief and the power of oxygen from the accumulation of instances of having experienced it when we've needed it most.

Given this tension between anxiety and joy in mind, one can begin to recognize that the relationship between playfulness and joy is multidimensional and more subtle than one might think. One cannot fully predict what one is going to experience in being playful with others.^{xvi} One *can* trust that one will feel joy in the midst of being playful from time to time, but it is beyond our ability to control or predict. We experience joy occasionally not because of how well we perform or express playfulness but because with the help of others we have managed to breathe some much-needed oxygen.

In a nuanced understanding of the relationships between joy and playfulness, playfulness creates a supportive space to experience the push/pull of joy and anxiety. At moments of playfulness, a youth might experience more joy and less anxiety, and at times a mix of both. She might experience wonder, laughter, or a sense of adventure in being playful. However, there may be times when a young person is so absorbed in the experience of anxiety that joy seems all but impossible. In these moments, it's not the adult's job to correct or save the young person from anxiety, but to help hold with openness and respect the youth and what she is holding. Feeling supported, a young person can then in turn hold her own experience more lightly, making way for other experiences such as authenticity, risk, surprise, wrestling and healing even in the midst of anxiety. The caring adult helps to remind the young person of the prospect of joy--not so much in words, but in his/her way of being with the young person. In doing so, the adult brings what we could call the hope of joy.

How Playfulness Helps Young People

A story from X's ministry helps to illustrate how playfulness helps young people:

When I was teaching a course on faith and formation with a group of pastors, I invited them to do a *cajita sagrada* project. A *cajita sagrada* is translated from Spanish as "a sacred box." I invited pastors to make a sacred box that captured the essence, mission, and vision of their respective church. However, rather than creating the cajita alone, the pastors had to enlist the help of their youth.

The pastors brought in their *cajitas sagradas*, which were beautiful, but even more astonishing were the relationships that pastors and their youth had forged in the playfulness of creating and imagining together. From their youth, pastors learned how their vision and mission were and were not being fulfilled. Some discovered that their youth did not feel safe to be themselves, valued, or cared for as “real” people with “real” problems. Some realized that youth were struggling with bullying, body image, sexuality and did not feel that their church was a place that they could go to for help or advice. Some found that their youth at a loss for words because they had never before been seen or talked to, let alone heard.

This story illustrates how leaders can provide conditions that foster being playful with the push/pull of joy and anxiety. The youth were able to be increasingly present and “real,” as they felt sufficiently safe to express their vulnerability and disappointment. At the same time, the exercise created the opportunity for young people to experience the support of being held with care, the deepening of relationships with their pastors, and the surprise of creating together something beautiful and unique--all of which invited an emerging awareness of what some would call joy.

Playfulness helps young people by providing what organizational behaviorist Alice Y. Kolb and educational theorist David A. Kolb call “ludic learning space” in which participants may stretch and grow. They define a ludic learning space as a “holistic model that views play and learning as a unified and integral process of human learning and development...where learners achieve deep learning through the integration of intellectual, physical, moral, and spiritual values in a free and safe enough space that provides the opportunity for individuals to play with their potentials and ultimately commit themselves to learn, develop and grow.”^{xvii} A ludic learning space is one in which youth can feel “safe enough” to engage in risk through exploration, being themselves and play, learn, and grow according to what suits them best.^{xviii}

As a spiritual practice, playfulness can help young people weather the multiple challenges of growing up and reflect on the sticky questions of purpose, identity, and life. With help, they can paint an image of their body, discuss what the world says might be wrong with it, and reflect on what it means to be made in God’s image (*imago dei*). They can roleplay a scene of bullying with dolls, exploring different methods of dealing with difficult situations. Toying with possibilities aids youth in establishing a sense of agency as they can choose to act upon what has emerged.

Holding lightly allows young people to risk and explore ideas about who they are and who God is without familial and societal pressure to know exactly what they should do or be. For example, young people can use Minecraft to create a world or a church of which they desire to be a part.^{xix} This activity requires them to think through many of the decisions they are making in the creative process. If they are creating a church, is there a pulpit? If there is, who is behind the pulpit? Is there stain glass, dancing, a garden, or youth? Where is God? While other educational activities can be dedicated to imparting Christian tradition to young people, they also need spaces to put into words, images, and forms, aspects of their theology that had otherwise remained un-formed as well as unexpressed.

In a world that often treats young people as not yet full human beings,^{xx} holding lightly provides an opportunity for adults to see, hear, and listen to youth so that they gain a “sense of somebodiness,” where they are enabled to feel that they are full human beings that deserve dignity, respect, and care.^{xxi} All youth deserve to feel like they are somebody, but consider how much more important this sense would be for marginalized youth—for example, youth of color, LGBTQI youth, or undocumented youth—who have internalized a sense of not having the right to be.

Theological Possibilities

When Jesus says “...unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,”^{xxii} he expresses cryptic wisdom. He seems to be telling those of us who have outgrown childhood to retrieve something that we have lost. Perhaps being “like a child” means being open, curious, imaginative, creative, or trusting. No doubt you have your own associations to what being “like a child” means—maybe being playful. Of course, children do not live in this way all the time, and some children rarely do. There are conditions that must be met—feeling safe, cared for, loved, attended to (in case something happens). Jesus reminds us (youth and adults) of a way of being that some of us experienced at moments, implying that we have points of reference to intuit albeit dimly a truth about the kin(g)dom. Notice that his aphorism does not suggest that believers must achieve an ideal state of being associated with childhood or that people experience it all the time.^{xxiii} Moreover, it does not imply that “becom[ing] like a child” happens *independently of a relational context that is indispensable*.

We propose approaching playfulness in conjunction with the well-known Corinthian triad of faith, hope, and love. Reflecting on this triad in reverse order, we suggest that love serves as a foundation upon which to build, and hope is a next “stage,” and faith issues from both. First, being playful with young people is an act of *love*. In holding young people gently in their molting season, we encourage and enable them to hold with openness and respect the anxiety and joy they experience in life. To hold them tenderly in this delicate time is a deliberate, loving act in which adults set aside their egos, agendas, and assumptions to try and be “with and for” young people.^{xxiv} Experiencing the constancy of loving companions in this time of transformation, youth can dare to *hope*, which is the second of Paul’s triad. Sometimes they need to borrow our sense of hope that “This is not the end. There is more.” In being playful, we practice the hope of more. Finally, experiencing love and hope in being playful together, we deepen one another’s *faith*, which completes the triad. Adults enact faith in young people so that they come to know that they will not only survive their molting, but they will become bigger and stronger for it. As leaders, we embody the faith that these are God’s children and therefore our children. Their transformation deepens adults’ faith in the power of hope and love as well as faith in the power of Spirit to transform. Conversely, young people’s experience of hope and love in which adults have participated can form them in faith. They come to know that the “good news” is indeed good. In each of these—love, hope, and faith—Spirit has been at work within, between, and among us, making each possible, meaningful, and life-changing.

Practical Suggestions:

Four Practices for Cultivating A Culture of Playfulness

We have identified four practices to help leaders and young people create spaces where youth can be held lightly so they can cultivate habits of playfulness: deep listening, becoming aware of true self, engaging in artistic forms, and witnessing. These practices can be incorporated within any approach to youth ministry, though we also provide references to curricular modules we have developed to help leaders get started.

All of the four practices have in common two requirements: the *consistent loving presence* of adults with whom to be playful, and clearly delimited *forms of playfulness* that can be actualized.^{xxv} The adults hold the space, monitor and respond to what is unfolding, and

provide a sense of grounding even as they participate with youth in being playful. Maria Montessori might call this “observing” with “reverent love.”^{xxvi}

Practice 1 - Deep Listening

Whether it is practiced in informal conversation or in a more formal program, deep listening can give young people a “sense of somebodiness” (Grant), while providing them space to be playful. What is important is the presence of an adult or adults, who are committed to loving attentiveness and to the persistent effort to suspend judgment or commentary. (In other words, how could you be with a young person in a way that *she* would experience *you* to be present to her in a way that she needed.) In informal conversation, deep listening involves allowing the young person to speak, carefully taking in not only the words but what is behind the words. A youth can benefit from an adult serving as a sounding board, so that she can think aloud, without fear of needing to defend, argue, or explain. In other words, we practice deep listening so that a young person can think aloud playfully, spinning out ideas and toying with possibilities. In these moments, the young person is acting “as if” she is holding these ideas rather than they have a hold on her—that is, that she is acting and not being acted upon. When she experiences her own agency in this way, she can hold what she holds, and further, hold it lightly.

Deep listening can be practiced in group settings, teaching youth to listen deeply to one another. For example, youth might ask a peer honest, evocative questions that help deepen this person’s exploration, encouraging the peer to dream or hold lightly expectations, rather than giving advice or admonishment, which is how adults (and perhaps church leaders especially) often relate to young people.^{xxvii}

Practice 2 - Becoming Aware of Being True Self

A second practice that could help young people to practice holding lightly is to become aware of being true self more often and/or to a greater degree.^{xxviii} Feeling overwhelmed by pressures to fit in, to perform, and to be good enough, it is easy for young people to lose sight of their capacity to be true self (as is true of us all). True self is an expression referring to an authentic way of being, enabled by supportive conditions that allow a person to feel free to be imaginative and spontaneously creative.^{xxix}

In moments of playfulness (as in playing fully), adults and young people can be

swept up in the moment, but participants can subsequently reflect together on the degree to which they experienced true self as a means of being more true self more often in the future. For example, after engaging the curricular module we developed called, “Learning to Holding Lightly,” the adult leader(s) and youth can discuss being true self in the midst of the activities.^{xxx}

Practice 3 - Engaging in Artistic Forms

A third practice that cultivates playfulness in youth are engaging artistic forms that would allow them to express and create by taking inspiration from their own ideas, emotions, and memories. For example, a youth worker might offer a spoken word jam, an interpretative dance workshop, or digital story-making class that invites young people to express their thoughts, feelings, questions about a given theme, perhaps one that allows participants to reflect on the kind of deep questions we mentioned earlier. Almost any artistic medium can be used as a form for helping youth practice playfulness. Good artistic forms for playfulness are doable and accessible but capable of expressing depth and richness. Suitable forms give young people the opportunity to create something that is true to them. The artistic works that people create can become occasions for sharing, support, and theological reflection.

In a spoken word jam, a young person might perform a piece that allows her to express some of the complexity of what she feels, for example, in preparing for college. The form (in this case, spoken word) creates the opportunity and provides the medium through which she can hold lightly some of what she holds. Importantly, the young person is in charge of how much she reveals or doesn't reveal. However, she has support in being vulnerable if others are being playful with spoken word and everyone practices affirming one another's creativity.

Practice 4 – Witnessing

A fourth practice that could support young people in holding lightly what they carry is witnessing.^{xxxi} In Christian contexts, witnessing usually refers to giving public testimony about one's faith. However, we are using the notion of “witnessing” in a different sense. In terms of cultivating playfulness, when we “witness,” we tell people what we observe from our point of view. In other words, we lend a different and ideally a broader perspective. We do so not to challenge or compete with what they see, but to see what they see *and* see some

additional things. By witnessing someone's experience *and* enlarging it, gently, we help them know what they see is seen *but also* help them see a bit more. In witnessing, adults help young people to realize more possibilities than they might have imagined.

One form that witnessing might take place is through what Asian Americans, who have borrowed from the Hawaiian tradition, call “talk story” or storytelling. Talking story is a practice of faith in which people give narrative accounts of breakthrough moments in everyday life or “revelatory experiencing.” Deborah Lee writes, “Talk story reflects on defining moments that have shaped lives and asks, What have I learned? How have, I, [my family,] my people, or my community been transformed? What have I learned through my experiences about love, loss, God, and goodness? Where has there been evidence of Spirit on the way?”^{xxxiii} In a youth ministry setting, talking story would be practiced in response to what a young person has shared. After listening deeply and well to young people, telling a story in return can provide seeds that might be potentially used by them, not by telling them what to do, but by evoking imagination and opening up the world.^{xxxiiii} We have provided a curriculum module for youth and adults to practice talking story and listening to one another.

Conclusion

We hope your church is teeming with lobsters—strange and beautiful creatures who are climbing, clawing, and molting their way through life. They are waiting to be sought, to be found, to be held lightly, and to be released until they need the same from you. Each young person needs caring adults to see what phase they are in so as to provide the supportive conditions to be and become. We (authors) have faith that you and other caring adults can do this. You can provide spaces and practices that allow young people to cultivate playfulness as a spiritual practice, allowing them to hold more gracefully the anxiety and joy that comes with being human. Through deep listening, becoming aware of being true self, engaging in artistic forms, and witnessing—youth and adults can participate in the love, hope, and faith of being children in God's kin(g)dom.

Questions for Reflection

What do your youth say joy is?

To what extent is anxiety, joy, or playfulness a choice?

How do you experience Spirit in the midst of being playful with other?

As an adult, what gets in the way of your playfulness?

How can you help others in your congregation to understand and appreciate playfulness?

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ⁱ We (authors) first learned the notion of “holding lightly” from Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter, founders of InterPlay. They taught us that if you grip something too tightly, you can’t create with it freely.

ⁱⁱ This metaphor is a variation on Kenda Creasy Dean’s theme of molting lobsters when discussing churches, denominations, and theological schools. Kenda Creasy Dean, *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education – If We Let It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016) 28-9.

ⁱⁱⁱ In his early writing (1971), Jürgen Moltmann reflects on a close relationship between joy and play, as implied in his book title, *Die ersten Freigelassene der Schöpfung* (translated by the author as “The first liberated men in creation: experiments on the joy of freedom and the pleasure of play”), published as *Theology and Joy* (SCM, 1973). Jürgen Moltmann, “Christianity: A Religion of Joy,” in *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Justin E. Crisp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 1. This same text (without David Jenkins’ introduction) was also published as *Theology of Play* (Harper & Row, 1972). As I (X) have argued elsewhere, Moltmann’s understanding of play is one-dimensional, focusing exclusively on a particular affective experience in playing—namely that of joy. X Book citation. Ultimately, Moltmann abandons associating play with joy, focusing solely on the latter. For example, when he argues in 2015 that Christianity is “a religion of joy,” he makes no references to play. Moltmann, “Religion of Joy,” 1-15.

^{iv} Expecting young people to feel, experience, or practice joy without also acknowledging other feelings could shame them into conformity and encourage hiding when they cannot conform. Because young people want to be seen as good and right, they are liable to attempt to exude what might be considered “joy.” Unwittingly, we would be encouraging youth to be “joyful” regardless of other feelings, emotions, or experiences in their lives, teaching them to ignore themselves. Joy could easily become synonymous with right, good, and a blessing and not being joyful or experiencing joy could easily become synonymous with wrong, evil, and sin.

^v This is the same critique, for example, that Mary Clark Moschella has made of pastoral theology, in which theologians are overly focused on suffering. Mary Clark Moschella, *Caring for Joy: Narrative, Theology, and Practice* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), xi-xii.

^{vi} While it is common to discuss the subject of play, the gerund form “playing” expresses the experiential and active dimensions of this creative way of being and relating. Adding the “ing” connotes the embodied, being-in-the-world (and therefore relational) character of playing.

vii *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Playful,” accessed January 3, 2017, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/search?source=%2F10.1093%2Facref%2F9780199571123.001.0001%2Facref-9780199571123&q=playful>.

viii We contrast our definition to understanding playfulness as a practice of “encouraging joyful, childlike wonder and engagement with creation.” “Empowering Youth: The Foundations of Joyful, Flourishing Lives (a.k.a., Joy ‘Enhancers’)” Joy and Adolescent Faith and Flourishing Project.

ix The metaphor “holding lightly” carries a surplus of meaning. It refers to holding something gently, respectfully, or carefully as opposed to holding firmly, tensely, or anxiously. Of course the metaphor “light” also signals (in Western imagination) being held “in the light” rather than “in the dark,” and as such connotes being able to see, and know, feel safe, be curious, and explore. Though alternative wordings do not capture the range of relevant meanings, for purposes of avoiding repetition we will speak, in this chapter, of holding lightly, holding gently, holding tenderly.

x When we act “as if,” we are in a sense commingling two kinds of experiences, two ways of being, two ways of sensing ourselves and one another. On the one hand, we are “here,” grounded in reality, meaning others also experience what we’re experiencing as real and true. But on the other hand we are NOT here in the everyday sense of routine. We are in a “different” sense of “here” in a “different” sense of ourselves. The difference we are enacting involves treating ideas, situations, or experiences as provisional, not finished, and open-ended.

xi Playfulness is a relational practice because playing happens in relationship—but not in every relationship. In his seminal work on playing, D.W. Winnicott, a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, argues that playing is rooted in the first experiences of playing between mother and child. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005). From a Winnicottian perspective, baby can play only to the extent to which mother has played adequately with the child. As is the case with playing, it is possible to be playful by ourselves, but from a Winnicottian point of view, at moments we can be playful alone having practiced being playful with others—so much so that we carry them with us even in their absence.

xii We are indebted to Chris Schlauch’s work on holding on and being held, a deepening of Winnicott’s concept. Chris R. Schlauch, “Readings of Winnicott,” *Pastoral Psychology* 65 (2016), 262-265.

xiii Tillich has other ideas about the polarities or “elements” that characterize human beings, but we are drawing on his thinking on finitude and anxiety to develop a different understanding of theological anthropology. For more on Tillich’s version, see Langdon Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 89.

xiv Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951-63), 191-2. Quoted in Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich*, 93. Parenthetical comment by Gilkey.

xv The designation “kin(g)dom” references Jesus’ metaphor of the “kingdom” of God but leaving open the possibility of reimagining it more inclusively as “kindom.”

xvi Because playfulness as holding lightly resists the predetermination of outcomes, one can begin to appreciate more fully it is problematic to instrumentalize playfulness in service of joy. Although it is wonderful when we experience joy in the midst of being playful, being playful with the intention of seeking joy is a contradiction that diminishes the open-ended nature of playfulness.

xvii Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb, “Learning to Play, Playing to Learn. A Case Study of a Ludic Learning Space,” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 23, no. 1 (2010): 27.

xviii Kolb and Kolb’s notion of ludic learning space resonates with the notion that to play is to engage reality “as if,” exploring freely the world with its many possibilities, finding and losing self in the known and unknown. Young people need this as they are figuring out who they are and dealing with issues that arise from living in our society.

xix Minecraft is a video game in which players can create with building blocks, like virtual legos.

xx We do this by not listening to young people’s concerns, not trying out their ideas, not having space for them in our places of worship, and referring to them as the future rather than also “people of today.” Jacquelyn Grant, “A Theological Framework,” in *Working with Black Youth: Opportunities for Christian Ministry*, ed. Charles R. Foster and Grant S. Shockley (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989): 67.

xxi Grant, “A Theological Framework,” 64.

^{xxii} Matthew 18:3, NRSV.

^{xxiii} According to Jerome Berryman, the founder of a Montessori approach to Sunday school called Godly Play, Jesus's "becoming-like-a-child aphorism...shatters the hope of entering a state of perfection, which was longed for in ancient times and by all of us at some time. In contrast, Jesus said that life is neither just becoming nor just being. It is living in the continuing creativity of the kingdom." Jerome Berryman, *Becoming Like a Child: The Curiosity of Maturity Beyond the Norm* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 23-4.

^{xxiv} Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 71.

^{xxv} The notion of "forms" comes from Winton Henry and Porter. Forms create opportunities and structure for playful engagement with one another. Some people use the language of "games," rather than forms, but unlike games, forms have no winners and losers, which we find more appropriate for church and more open-ended.

^{xxvi} Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method: Scientific Pedagogy as Applied to Child Education in 'the Children's Houses' with Additions and Revisions by the Author* (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 2003 [1912])10-11.

^{xxvii} An example of formal deep listening includes what Parker Palmer calls "circles of trust," which might be adapted to support the playfulness of youth. Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life: Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

^{xxviii} D. W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment; Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*, (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), 140-143.

^{xxix} We can only be who we truly are in moments, in particular settings, with certain people. So "true self" does not refer to a static or ideal version of oneself, but rather to experiencing the occasion to be increasingly present and real.

^{xxx} A form like Godly Play could also help a young person remember what it's like to be like a child who experiences greater degrees of true self and/or more frequently. At first it might seem silly to engage a teenager in a form most known for its effectiveness for fostering biblical literacy among young children. However, Godly Play can give young people the opportunity to surprise themselves as they allow themselves to be playful, (re)discovering the magic of biblical stories.

^{xxxi} Winton-Henry and Porter understand "witnessing" as seeing the good in what others have created, which is akin to mirroring. This is a slightly different understanding of witnessing that how we define it below.

^{xxxii} Deborah Lee, "Faith Practices for Racial Healing and Reconciliation," in *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, eds. Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2003), 154. Lee writes about talk story as practice that facilitates racial healing and reconciliation. The reference to family is added to make it more relevant for working with youth.

^{xxxiii} Providing starters for imagination is what "good enough" mothers (and other parental figures) do, according to Winnicott. They don't give a baby a toy and say, "You must play with this." They provide multiple possibilities from which to choose and with which baby can create. Witnessing requires the adult to be highly sensitive to what is needed, much like the parent is ideally attuned to what baby needs. Our work is to present young people with multiple possibilities at the right moment, hoping that some of what we provide will match what they need well enough to use creatively.