

THE WONDERING TOGETHER PROJECT

**An Ethnographic Study of Twelve Families that
Examines the Impact of Adopting a Daily Examen Practice
Utilizing a Godly Play® Inspired Method of Wondering**

by

Sally D. Thomas

A Doctor of Ministry Project
Submitted to the Faculty of
Eden Theological Seminary
In partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

St. Louis, Missouri
May 2022

Copyright © 2022 by Sally D. Thomas
All rights reserved

THE WONDERING TOGETHER PROJECT

**An Ethnographic Study of Twelve Families that
Examines the Impact of Adopting a Daily Examen Practice
Utilizing a Godly Play® Inspired Method of Wondering**

by

Sally D. Thomas

Eden Theological Seminary
Saint Louis, Missouri

Project Supervisor: Dr. Laurel Koepf

Signature

Date

Second Reader: Dr. Adam Ployd

Signature

Date

To all the families I have met in wonder:

Those who pointed the way,
the twelve who participated in this project,
and,
especially,
my very own.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	Wisdom Wonders: Introduction	Page 1
Chapter 2	Reading the Wise Ones: Literature & Grounding Theory	Page 5
Chapter 3	Observing Wondering: Methodology & Research Design	Page 40
Chapter 4	The Wondering Together Project: Analysis	Page 62
Chapter 5	What Was Learned and What Is Next: Conclusion	Page 117
Appendices		Page 122
Bibliography		Page 177

List of Appendices

Appendix		Page
A.	Prayer of Abandonment	122
B.	Assessment of Risk to Human Subjects	123
C.	Invitation to WTP from St. Stephen's & Photo of Lenten Resource Materials	124-125
D.	Adult Consent Form	126
E.	Minor Consent Form.....	127
F.	Informational Flyer for Email Distribution	128
G.	Demographic Information Form	129-131
H.	WTP Code Book, final version	132-133
I.	Family Portraits	134-156
J.	Interview Rubrics by Week	157-161
K.	(Graph) Connection, Impact, & Ritual Code Totals by Week	162
L.	(Graph) Codes Related to 5th Question by Week ...	163
M.	(Table) Week #2 Ownership of Practice by Family (R-6 Code)	164
N.	(Graph) Connection & Disconnection Code Totals by Family and Week	165
O.	(Graph) Impact Code Totals by Week	166
P.	(Graph) Thesis Question Responses by Family Group	167
Q.	(Graph) Occurrence of COVID Codes by Family...	168
R.	(Graph) Families with COVID Codes by Week	169
S.	(Graph) Grouped Ritual Code Totals by Week (Valuable, Generative, Sustainable, Ownership)	170
T.	(Graph) Grouped Ritual Codes Totals by Week	171
U.	(Graph) Connection Code Totals by Week	172
V.	(Image) 4 Question Wondering Stone	173
W.	(Image) 5 Question Wondering Stone	174
X.	(Graph) R-8 Totals by Week	175
Y.	(Graph) Codes Related to Fifth Question by Week..	176

ABSTRACT

In the early 21st century, American families appear to connect less often through home-based rituals due to increasing demands on family time, including multiple ‘digital distractions’. This ethnographic study of twelve families evaluated the impact of incorporating a daily secular examen for four weeks utilizing a Godly Play® style of wondering. Families expressed a positive personal and familial value in adopting the practice according to qualitative and quantitative data analysis. It is recommended that future research employs a longer research period, a cohort across a wider socio-economic and cultural spectrum, and considers extra-familial applications for the practice.

Chapter 1: Wisdom Wonders

But when we persevere with the help of a gentle discipline,
we slowly come to hear the
still, small voice and to feel the delicate breeze,
and so come to know the presence of Love.¹

Welcome to the Wondering Together Project; a synthesis, a synergy, an experiment. Imagine a family coming together daily (or almost daily) to check in with each other using the same five questions. No fixing, no nagging, no chores. Just being wholly present as each member shares a bit about their day. Was the practice meaningful? This project looks at how a simple ritual impacted twelve families from across the United States. Like many of my colleagues in the art of Godly Play®, we know in our bones that Love is abundantly present in the circles of children with whom we sit. As Nouwen observes, the ‘gentle discipline’ of listening to one another and being heard is a divine invitation to experience that still small voice. That is the foundation of the Wondering Together experiment.

But there was also that moment that got the ball rolling. Perhaps you know those times when you observe or hear or think something that will not go away; a call that you cannot shake. Maybe not as awesome as a Damascus road experience but God is clearly leading the way. For me, it was an ordinary Sunday. I was flitting around our church’s

¹ Nouwen Henri J M., *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (New York, NY: Image Books, 2000), 28.

narthex on a crisp autumn morning when everything in nature was in that season's sharp, characteristic freshness. Our youngest worshippers were returning from the nursery or their Godly Play® circles to join their families for the Eucharist in a familiar series of Sunday morning transitions. I stood at the rear of the sanctuary with a grateful heart – for children, for this community, for my purpose there as Minister to Children and Families.

Unexpectedly, a distillation of sorts happened as I observed the bodies of families in the pews meld. Children were nestling up to their parents as they do. But there was more to those snuggles. Across the church, parents' shoulders relaxed and families shaped themselves together into what appeared much like upright litters of puppies. Even teens and tweens wanted nothing more than to be burrowed into their gathered tribe. Someone once said that we don't cry about unimportant things, so why was I teary as I observed the backs of these families gathered in our congregation? I truly felt Wisdom right next to me and She wondered, "Why does this feel so important? No phones out, no tablets visible ... and all seem to be at a deep, connected, and visceral peace." It was 2014 and this moment was my clarion call to the Wondering Together Project.

Inspired by my unshakable sense that families were instinctively hungry for deeper connection, I began to speculate about how the arrival of digital technology was complicating things. But was that really true? And if it was, what might I have to bring to the table? I am grateful to Eden Theological Seminary for empowering this lay person to live into my capacity as a practical theologian and for giving me the freedom to recognize that this was not a church-based challenge but a world-based one.

Catalyzed by that observation and my subsequent distillation of it as a doctoral student, what follows is an organized compilation of the process by which a small pilot

research project unfolded and was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was borne of the holy nudge to research this notion and shaped by some of my prior experiences; ordinary ‘lived learnings’ that the reader may share. For example, I am steeped in Ignatian spirituality and how I value the daily examen in my own life informs this project. I am also a former nurse practitioner who is fascinated by neurobiology and concerned about how social forces like poverty, extreme stress, and digital technology are reshaping our brains (not necessarily in productive and healthy ways.) As a graduate of seminary and a chaplain, I have experienced and offered the healing balm of presence, often gifted as nothing more than simple, silent witness. As a longtime Godly Play® practitioner, the role of dependable rituals and shared narratives in a calm and care-filled setting has permeated my practice of... just about everything. Most importantly, as a daughter, sister, wife and mother, the unique lexicon and connection forged within a family ecosystem – however and always imperfect – is the soil in which this research is sown. By virtue of our shared human experience, there are places of connection for every reader of this project. I welcome your thoughts.

Ahead in Chapter 2, I will offer a pertinent review of the literature that informed my thinking as I began this investigation and how it dovetailed with different avenues of my own experience. The ethnographic method that anchored the project’s design is detailed in Chapter 3. Of special import are the safeguards necessary whenever families, especially those with minor children, are some of your research partners. These families were so gracious in their investment of time and themselves in this research that I feel it is important to ‘know’ them as you enter into the data analysis of Chapter 4. In the Family Portraits Appendix, I offer a glimpse of each family as I experienced them during

our time together. Then, Chapter 4 unpacks the research findings in all their complexity. I share the quantitative data in service to the real marrow of the research – the narratives from the families themselves. As a novice researcher, there are sure to be some technical shortcomings in this chapter. I am grateful that the ethnographic method allowed me to be in relationship with these families – qualitative data would never have captured the varied and stirring experiences shared through dialogue. Truthfully, I fell in love with each family – their willingness to try this experiment, their honesty, and their commitment to one another. There was so much to mine in the narrative data that I focused on the ‘dance’ between what I heard and felt in the family experiences and the evidence in the statistical data. In the concluding chapter, I invite the reader to join me in considering the next steps suggested by the initial Wondering Together Project.

Throughout the writing of this project, one phrase was attached to my computer monitor that came to me as I wrote the project’s original proposal: *Sacred Humility*. *Sacred* because Wisdom was calling forth this work and *Humility* because the concepts are so simple, so ordinary, so humble. But in the chemistry of real families, sacred and humble synthesized into something worthy of our attention. Onward!

Chapter 2: Reading the Wise Ones: Literature Review & Grounding Theory

In the previous chapter, I discussed the observations and experiences that led me to believe that this pilot research project may be relevant in the current interdisciplinary discourse around supporting and fostering the emotional and spiritual health of families. In this chapter, I will examine the body of research and thought that compels and challenges me to investigate whether a simple, daily family practice may contribute to the well-being of its members and, perhaps, greater shalom for our world. This chapter serves as a dialogue between what the literature and tradition tell us and that for which 21st century families seem to hunger - connecting with self and one another despite the frenetic pace of daily life.

I found my way toward this research through experiential and intuitive notions and began by reconnecting with trusted academics and theologians that I have encountered in my own experience. Before a career in the church, I was a registered nurse and nurse practitioner focusing on HIV, oncology, and hospice care. In these roles in the 1980's and 1990's, I was grounded in the pioneering and unfolding understanding around mind-body research, particularly neurobiology. My sense of call to professional lay ministry and pastoral care emerged out of those experiences and I was onto training as a spiritual companion and then to seminary.

I initially knew Herbert Anderson as my first and favorite Pastoral Care professor. Then I delved deeply into his considerable body of work in practical theology. In *Mighty*

Stories, Dangerous Rituals, Dr. Anderson and Edward Foley reassess and reimagine the value of narrative in both Christian worship rituals as well as in personalized rites for individuals and families outside of the corporate worship setting.² Sr. Elizabeth Leibert was the program director when I studied spiritual direction and later my thesis advisor at San Francisco Theological Seminary. Her expertise in Ignatian discernment, spiritual practices, and moral injury, as well as the bibliographies from her authored articles, were my starting points about all things Ignatian, especially the examen. Serendipitously, I attended a workshop at St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco that Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn led in the early 2000's on prayer practices with families. The Linns authored some of the earliest approaches for using the examen beyond the boundaries of Roman Catholicism. *Sleeping with Bread* is their seminal text on the examen for the laity whether spiritual, seeking, or agnostic. Lastly, I am forever grateful to have been anchored and steeped in the work of Jerome Berryman whose approach to the spiritual companionship of children, Godly Play®, has 'leavened me' from self-effacing Sunday school teacher and missionary of dogma to passionate advocate for nurturing children and families in their spiritual journey. Berryman's extensive body of work, as well as the complementary writings of those he has inspired, have offered a particular perspective and focus to this research as well. These grounding thinkers were the entry points for my early stirrings toward this research project and pointed me to important primary sources and relevant research in its initial planning.

² Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

Utilizing contemporary theological and academic resources, I have been able to focus the lenses by which I conceived, conducted, and interpreted this project. In doing so, I have made every effort to avoid the likelihood of skewing the data. This is especially important to note as my thesis crosses multiple disciplines, including Christian theology. While I am expressly committed to not evangelizing or steering toward religion of any kind in this research, I am conscious of my inherent biases around the spirituality of children and families. It is these lenses and biases that I explore methodologically in Chapter 3.

Writ large, my thesis question asks how families and their individual members might be invited into new or additive ways to *make meaning*. That is the prevailing theme or “meta-lens” for this endeavor. Meaning making fosters deeper connection, dispels isolation, clarifies one’s purpose, helps reveal our personal and familial agency, and, thereby, nurtures shalom in our wider world.

Let me state my research question in its original form:

If a family adopts a habit of communal examen, will the practice enhance their existential and spiritual lexicon?

Here is the question, now diagrammed, with an eye to the different lenses through which I have chosen to distill it.

*If a family **adopts a habit** (Ritual Theory) of **communal examen** (Ignatian Spirituality), will the **practice** (Narrative Theory, Narrative Theology, and specifically the Godly Play® tradition) **enhance** (Neurobiology) their **existential and spiritual lexicon** (Family Resilience Theory)?*

There are places of confluence among these various lenses and, together, they assist me in addressing the question comprehensively but not completely. Race and poverty are two research areas that are addressed only tangentially as they are beyond the

practical scope of this literature review and initial pilot project. And, while the impact of digital preoccupation was my entry point in thinking about this research originally, the exploding body of social commentary around digital engagement required me to narrow my focus to the realms of peer-reviewed medical and social science which I have mined for relevant findings.

In this chapter I will address the foundational lenses of *why* and *how* I approach this project. I consider the *why* to be illuminated through Neurobiology, Family Resilience Theory, and Narrative Theory and Theology (including the Godly Play® approach). I will then progress to the *how* disciplines that inform the shape that the research activity itself takes: Ritual Theory and Ignatian Spirituality.

Why?: Neurobiology

The creation and workings of our brains are marvelous indeed. The key question for the purpose of this project is whether adopting a regular practice of the examen enhances a family's existential lexicon. The reasons why I posit that this pilot practice might strengthen a family's perception of their ability to encounter stressors going forward is due, in part, to contemporary research in neurobiology. Therefore, after a brief overview of brain architecture and function, this section will explore pertinent findings in the medical and social sciences that inform my research question and highlight where simple, pro-active strategies may enhance a family's experience of communal examen. These include recent discoveries about emotional self-regulation, pre-natal and early

childhood brain development, chronic exposure to stress, as well as potential opportunities for inviting positive brain changes.

At its simplest, the human brain is a three-part organ consisting of the brainstem, cerebellum, and cerebrum. The brainstem is often nicknamed ‘the reptilian brain’ as it mediates our most basic bodily functions including breathing, digestion, and temperature regulation. The cerebellum is positioned next to the brainstem and attends to issues of intentional movement, posture, and balance and is a shared brain trait with all vertebrates. The cerebrum is the largest part of the brain and is divided into two sides called hemispheres and smaller regions called lobes with their own distinct substructures. The most specialized region of the brain, the cerebrum, is the focus of much of the current neurobiological research as it is tasked with speech, movement, senses, and emotions. Included in the cerebrum is the human limbic system which mediates our emotions and motivations. For the purposes of this research and in the context of a theological perspective, I was initially curious about pioneering neurotheologians James B. Ashbrook and Carol Rausch Albright’s suggestion that the three brain lobes have been fashioned by a triune God with a corresponding purpose: God as omnipresent (brainstem), nurturing (limbic), and purposeful (cerebrum, specifically the neocortex.)³ While their proposition is an oversimplification of brain architecture and function, it serves as an intriguing summary of human brain evolution in the late 20th century as theologians attempted to reconcile the emerging understanding of neurobiology with theology. Current neurobiology recognizes that while the human brain can be understood as a sublime

³ David Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 34.

product of evolution, its three parts are not discrete and have evolved in complementary and complex ways which we do not fully understand.⁴ While there may be specific capacities in particular parts of the brain, “effective functioning depends on the work of the whole brain.”⁵ The triune God-as-brain proposition of Ashbrook and Albright serves as a reminder that people of faith may be enticed by easy answers in their understanding of how God is at work in the complexity of neurobiology. It is a cautionary tale for me in this exploration: there are no simple answers (though I recognize the irony that my research question describes “a simple practice.”)

Empathy, Emotions, Neurotransmitters, and Our Earliest Family Experiences

The roots of our ability to manage our feelings (emotional self-regulation) are learned skills beginning in infancy.⁶ The Mindful Schools movement counsels teachers and students to identify an emotion early in its arrival so that one reacts less out of habit and has “more flexibility in actions, moving beyond habit and reactivity.”⁷ Clinically known as *affect naming*, educators and therapists can often be overheard saying something like “naming an emotion, eases the emotion.”⁸ Sounds simple but, in practice,

⁴ Hogue, 39.

⁵ Hogue, 39.

⁶ Matilda A. Frick et al., “The Role of Sustained Attention, Maternal Sensitivity, and Infant Temperament in the Development of Early Self-Regulation,” *British Journal of Psychology* 109, no. 2 (December 2017): pp. 277-298, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12266>, 279.

⁷ Pam Nicholls, “Summary of Neuroscience: Insights from the Work of Dan Siegel, MD.” Mindful Schools, Curricular Digital File (Berkeley, CA, 2013), “Belly”.

⁸ Matthew D. Lieberman et al., “Putting Feelings Into Words,” *Psychological Science* 18, no. 5 (May 1, 2007): pp. 421-428, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01916.x>, 421.

we pattern our emotional responses based on the bonds and modeling of our earliest primary caregivers. The complexity of chemicals (neurotransmitters) that mediate what, how, and how deeply we feel, as well as how we choose to respond, are the focus of a great deal of current research that includes the monitoring of certain blood chemistries, physical responses (blood pressure, heart and respiratory rate), as well as brain activity using advanced imaging like functional magnetic resonance imaging ('fMRI'). For example, Matthew Lieberman and his colleagues used fMRI to demonstrate "... the first unambiguous evidence that affect labeling ... produces diminished responses to negative emotional images in the amygdala and other limbic regions."⁹ In layperson's terms, naming an emotion does lessen the burden one experiences from it.

Neurotransmitters also play a role in how we interpret our perception of someone else's feelings. When we are able to identify our own challenging emotions, we produce increased dopamine and oxytocin in response. Dopamine in healthy emotional states increases our motivation and curiosity about the people and circumstances around us while oxytocin invites a feeling of peace and relaxation, promoting nurture of self and nurture of others.¹⁰

Cortisol is a naturally produced hormone with a number of important functions in the body and many interactions with our neurotransmitters in a complicated interplay of body chemistry that impacts everything from our sleeping-waking cycles to thyroid function. Nicknamed the 'fight or flight hormone', cortisol is overproduced in stressful situations to assist in heightening our awareness and preparing us to make quick

⁹ Lieberman et al., 427.

¹⁰ Nicholls, 5.

decisions when challenged emotionally or physically. Interestingly, an elevated cortisol level impairs the function of the better angels of our pre-frontal cortex's (also known as our *executive brain*) higher ordered decision making ability in deference to the rapid life-or-death choices to be made under extreme stress.¹¹ When cortisol levels remain abnormally high in the bloodstream, it causes long-term wear and tear on our physical and psychological functioning called *allostatic load*.¹² Eventually, this allostatic load impacts the natural rhythm cortisol has in our bodies (higher levels in the morning and lower levels at bedtime) and cortisol activity becomes blunted and less responsive. Ultimately, this blunting of cortisol levels is biological evidence of long-term exposure to stress. For adults, this may manifest as depression, obesity, metabolic syndrome, Type 2 diabetes, fertility issues, high blood pressure, heart attack, dementia, and stroke.¹³

High levels of cortisol due to stress are especially harmful for brain development in infants and children. Ongoing stressors like poverty, food insecurity, unstable or inadequate attachments with primary caregivers, and violence in the home contribute to this allostatic load. High levels of stress in pregnancy (sometimes called *toxic stress*) impact developing infants. Toxic stress may manifest as diminished brain size, behavioral issues, chromosomal changes, neural connection disorders, and are all health challenges that are seeded *in utero*. Additionally, cortisol and other stress hormones elevated in

¹¹ Catherine Price, "Putting Down Your Phone May Help You Live Longer," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/well/mind/putting-down-your-phone-may-help-you-live-longer.html>.

¹² Kathleen Brewer-Smyth and Harold G. Koenig, "Could Spirituality and Religion Promote Stress Resilience in Survivors of Childhood Trauma?" *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 35, no. 4 (2014): pp. 251-256, <https://doi.org/10.3109/01612840.2013.873101>, 253.

¹³ Price.

depressed mothers often result in reduced fetal growth and put babies and mothers at risk for premature labor.¹⁴ These compounded traumas or ‘Adverse Childhood Experiences’ (ACE’s) have garnered a great deal of research excitement and controversy in the areas of pediatric health, neurobiology, education, and the social sciences in the past ten years.¹⁵

Adverse Childhood Experiences are critical when thinking about studies such as mine. Researchers have developed ACE’s tools to quantify the different degrees to which children have been exposed to traumatic adverse experiences.¹⁶ Acknowledging that all children are exposed to some degree of ACE stressors, these tools are helpful in suggesting which children and families might benefit from early intervention when prioritizing resources.¹⁷ It is no surprise that race and poverty play a heavy hand in the impact of ACE’s on children.¹⁸ ACE screening instruments are recent additions in routine care in many school and pediatric care practices as they offer insight as to which children are likely exposed to higher levels of cortisol and its bevy of physical and neurobiological impacts. Neurotheologian David Hogue summarizes the trade-off in human brain evolution that necessitates our careful attention to children today:

Because we have traded a rich repertoire of instincts for the ability to adapt to a wide array of environments, human beings require extensive nurturing during childhood and intensive mentoring and training. And beyond the practicalities of

¹⁴ Nancy Cambria and Laurie Skrivan, “The Crisis Within: How Toxic Stress and Trauma Endanger Our Children,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 21, 2016, pp. 51-60, <https://graphics.stltoday.com/apps/stress/index.html>.

¹⁵ Adverse Childhood Events (ACE’s). For information see "Aces Science 101," ACE's Too High, accessed June 22, 2018, <https://acestoohigh.com/aces-101/>.

¹⁶ Link [here](#) to investigate ACE clinical evaluation tool. <https://www.acesaware.org/screen/screening-tools/>

¹⁷ ACE’s tools note that all children evidence trauma to varying degrees. It is the compounding of trauma that aggravates and amplifies the impact.

¹⁸ Cambria and Skrivan.

living, the need for nurture and affection is built into our nervous systems. Children left alone die.¹⁹

The implications of childhood stressors carry over into adulthood. In one study, adult women survivors of trauma in their youth have been found to have dysregulated cortisol levels; disproportionately low levels of cortisol upon waking and abnormally elevated levels in the evening which result in chronic sleep pattern disturbances.²⁰ Karen Brewer-Smyth Ph.D. and Harold Koenig M.D., the study's authors, demonstrated that women who have higher levels of perceived friendship and support, including those through faith-based connections, experienced a protective effect against abnormal cortisol function that the authors describe as evidence of resilience.²¹ There is also compelling research that supports the benefit of "early preventative interventions" on mitigating cortisol dysregulation in children at high risk.²² Luecken et al. examined how cortisol levels differed in children six years after participating in a bereavement program following parental loss in a randomized trial in Arizona.²³ The study revealed that children who participated in a 12-week bereavement group at the time of their loss had appropriately higher cortisol responses when participating in a follow-up study six years later. The authors of this study concluded that "... a family-focused intervention for

¹⁹ Hogue, 77-8.

²⁰ Brewer-Smyth, 253.

²¹ Brewer-Smyth, 253.

²² Linda J. Luecken et al., "Cortisol Levels Six-Years after Participation in the Family Bereavement Program," *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 35, no. 5 (2010): pp. 785-789, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2009.11.002>.

²³ Luecken, 786. The trial included one group of children and caregivers who received 12 two-hour weekly sessions and a control group of bereaved children who were invited to participate in a self-study program at home at the time of parental loss.

parentally bereaved children provided in childhood was associated with higher cortisol six years later relative to a control group of bereaved youth.”²⁴ I highlight both of these studies as important to my thesis: if there is evidence indicating that both early intervention in childhood as well as friendship and connection in adulthood are impactful in unwinding some of the cortisol dysregulation of earlier trauma, perhaps the nurturing of an effective familial support practice through a simple daily ritual might serve as a modest step in mediating the impact of stress, to whatever degree a family experiences it.

While a review of ritual theory follows later in this chapter, it is pertinent to note here that there is research regarding how rituals affect us neurobiologically. For example, developmental psychologist John D. Friesen’s research determined that rituals excite both brain hemispheres which results in “deep emotional experiences ...facilitating personal integration and the feeling of well-being.”²⁵ This is another suggestion that family ritual conversation might be an opportunity to reverse the impact of ‘toxic stress’.

The Shema

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your might.*

*Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.
Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home
and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.
Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,
and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NRSV)

²⁴ Luecken, 788.

²⁵ John D Friesen, “Rituals and Family Strength,” *Direction* 19, no. 1 (1990): pp. 39-48, 46-7.

Why?: Narrative Theory and Children's Spirituality

Being seen, known, and appreciated through the sharing of stories has been integral to the human experience. Hieroglyphs and cave paintings are evidence of this.²⁶ My ministry anchors me in how stories shape and sustain faith communities and I come to this project with a deep appreciation and wonder about how the stories we tell weave together our larger societal mores. The narratives we repeat mirror the people we are and when there is a dearth of stories, I believe individuals and societies may become untethered. I am curious if this daily family ritual might be a radical act of tethering.

Our brains are hard-wired to hear stories and when we hear them again and again, we form deeper brain associations. Known as "*the compression effect*," these increasingly complex connections foster more complicated thinking and allow us to make more profound meaning each time we hear that same story.²⁷ Thousands of years before there were brain scans to prove this phenomenon, people understood this intuitively as it was key for their survival. If you wanted your children to know the planting rotation for your crops, you told them over and over as you worked alongside them in the field. Families were never sure who would live and who would die from one season to the next and needed their children to hold that wisdom to ensure dependable sow/reap patterns so they would not starve.²⁸ So, too, ancient parents told their children the stories of their faith and

²⁶ Melissa Mendoza, "The Evolution of Storytelling," *Reporter*, May 1, 2015

²⁷ L.M. Lillywhite et al., "The Neural Architecture of Discourse Compression," *Neuropsychologia* 48, no. 4 (2010): pp. 873-879, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2009.11.004>, 873.

²⁸ Laurel Koepf Taylor, "The Value of Education and Enculturation," in *Give Me Children or I Shall Die: Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 66.

they told those stories often and with increasing complexity as the children got older. Due to this same *compression effect*, the stories became ingrained and nimbly accessible as resources for decision making.

Christian educator Peter Gilmour observes that “stories are the sacred texts of our lives.”²⁹ This is apparent with the ancient Israelites who were steeped in the law of the *Shema*.³⁰ Beginning in childhood, they learned their foundational cultural and religious stories by heart and recalled them often for guidance. Much later, their faith stories were written down by scribes and many centuries later they were preserved in print. Even so, humans across cultures were still telling stories around meals and hearth fires because it was as efficient and effective in instilling those stories as it was comforting.³¹ In retelling them, they became more than just stories; transforming into allegories and guideposts that undergirded moral and faithful lives.³²

Starting with the Industrial Revolution in the mid 18th century, I suspect that people in urban settings began to make a trade. To varying degrees, the sharing of stories was exchanged for efficiency and productivity. This may be most evident in the proliferation of child labor and the creation of Sunday schools to offset deficits in education as urban children entered the workforce. In doing so, a slow ‘starvation’ of

²⁹ Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 4.

³⁰ The *Shema* is quoted in its entirety on pages 16. Underlined passage is mine for emphasis.

³¹ Polly W. Wiessner, “Embers of Society: Firelight Talk among the Ju/’Hoansi Bushmen,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 39 (2014): pp. 14027-14035, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1404212111>, 14033.

³² Lucas M. Bietti et al., “Cultural Transmission in a Food Preparation Task: The Role of Interactivity, Innovation and Storytelling,” *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 9 (2019): pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221278>, 2.

sorts began in families as fewer and fewer narratives of their faith, community, and family were told due to changing industrial work rhythms and priorities. The importance of sharing stories – both giving and receiving them – has further shifted in the post-modern era. “Fewer and fewer parents of today narrate stories to their children.”³³ We are now more of a ‘once and done’ culture with stories of family lore, births and deaths, silly things and tragedy, tending to get told once if at all. One child in my Godly Play® circle captured this phenomenon when she said, “Only my grandma has time to tell me stories more than once. My parents tell me I should be learning new things, not asking about old stories but I like hearing my story over and over!” Telling stories only once curtails the *compression effect* and the opportunity to allow these important personal narratives to deepen and become sources of wisdom within our brain’s neuroarchitecture.

I have asserted that expanding digital engagement in our culture likely decreases the number and kind of stories that are told at home. It follows that families have less opportunity to benefit from the documented emotional and relational benefits that the act of both telling and hearing narratives yields within one’s family.³⁴ I hope to better understand if families recapture a habit of daily story sharing though an accessible and practical examen whether it might serve an additive or complementary role to any relational and/or narrative practices already in place. While my sense is that narrative practices within a family provide time and opportunity to point us toward the Divine, I reiterate here that evangelism is not the intent of this project. Rather, I am investigating

³³ Anne Pellowski, *The World of Storytelling* (Bronx, NY: H.W. Wilson, 1990), 177-9.

³⁴ Elaine Reese, “What Kids Learn from Hearing Family Stories,” *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2013.

whether the practice will augment the ways families support one another in meaning making. Theologian Sharon Daloz Parks contends that meaning making is the work we do throughout our lives. She connects it and faith thusly: “Faith is meaning making in light of the ultimate.”³⁵ I believe the Wondering Together Project (WTP) family ritual may engender the kind of meaning making Parks references; a sense of connection that invites us beyond the realm of the ordinary.

The practice and culture of reconnecting with our storytelling selves is integral to the pedagogy of narrative theology. Narrative theologian Benjamin Espinoza imagines it thusly: “Narrative theology, then, seeks to contribute to the transformation of the world through engaging the living, robust narrative of the Christian faith, seeking to liberate people from oppressive narratives, forming the identities of people, and helping people move from ‘lived’ stories to ‘living’ stories.”³⁶ At its essence, narrative theology is paradoxical as both a trustworthy instrument with a very wide lens; trustworthy in its documented impact for humanity through the ages and across cultures and wide because narrative takes so many forms. Therefore, I believe it is the ideal lens through which we try to understand the nature of the existential in relationship to our human experience. That is why it is one of the theories that grounds my thinking for this project.

How do we define *narrative theology*? For this I turn to theologian Jerry H. Stone who wrote in the late 20th century. He describes this way of encountering God and our

³⁵ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, rev. ed., Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 11.

³⁶ Benjamin D. Espinoza, “The Christian Story and Our Stories: Narrative Pedagogy in Congregational Life,” *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 10, no. 2 (2013): pp. 432-443, <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131301000213>, 434.

scriptures thusly: "... the heart of a culture's meaning [is] in its narrative tradition. The narrative Christian theology ... looks to the narratives of the Bible and the broader Christian tradition for the richest expression of religion."³⁷ The practice and culture of reconnecting with our storytelling selves is integral to the pedagogy of narrative theology. At its essence, narrative theology (like systematic or practical theology) is simply a lens through which we try to understand the nature of God in relationship to our human experience. Narrative theologians argue that we approximate the deepest meaning of scripture when, "we involve ourselves in the full narrative flow of a religion's literary tradition."³⁸

Within our Western context, I do not want to intimate that storytelling is dead for it is not. In particular, Anne Streaty Wimberly highlights the strong narrative traditions that arose during "the slave era and built on the story orientation of African culture."³⁹ But even in her work around the practice of *story linking* as a modern method of narrative theology, she observes a decline in the embeddedness of the tradition in her own African American community.⁴⁰ I sense the African American enculturation and practice of storytelling, both past and present, might provide the 'embers' of the narrative tradition needed to rekindle this vital Christian practice within our larger society. Wimberly's 'formula' for linking stories into a relevant, memorable whole that fosters discipleship is

³⁷ Jerry H Stone, "Narrative Theology and Religious Education," in *Theologies of Religious Education*, ed. Randolph Crump Miller (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1995), pp. 256-284, 256.

³⁸ Stone, 256.

³⁹ Wimberly, *xi*.

⁴⁰ Wimberly, 24.

comprehensive. She cites three types of stories (personal, communal, and Christian) that need to be brought into dialogue to animate people into living into the fullness of the Christian life.⁴¹ Ella Mitchell, in her seminal article “Oral Tradition: Legacy of Faith for the Black Church,” chronicles the role of story, both in West African culture as well as American slave culture, as the primary source of education. Telling stories was understood to be the primary duty of her community on behalf of its future. There was a sense within the generations that the truths held within the stories were “always known” and so it was no surprise that even young children were capable of deep theological interpretation with the biblical texts-as-stories within which they were steeped.⁴² Before anyone had outlined the neurobiology of the *compression effect*, Mitchell shared how it was story repetition that fed the learning of the Christian narrative and its promise of liberation.

Stories entertained or served to settle weighty matters. Everyone knew how the plot would come out, but they enjoyed reliving the experience and treasured the unique artistry of the raconteur. Further interest was generated by the large amount of audience participation expected from young and old alike. It would be hard *not* to learn the values of the society in such a communicative context, enlivened by the mixing of poetry and music, and even dance and drumming.⁴³

In her book, *Cultural Miseducation*, Jane Roland Martin makes a compelling case for the use of story as foundational in early childhood moral learning as an antidote to what she calls the ‘cultural stock’ of our time. “All of which is to say that the cultural stock belonging to the Western and Eastern, the Northern and Southern worlds right now

⁴¹ Karen B. Tye, *Basics of Christian Education* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009), 51.

⁴² Mitchell, 94.

⁴³ Mitchell, 95-6.

being passed to successive generations includes murder and rape, terrorism and war, prejudice and discrimination, poverty and greed.”⁴⁴ While she affirms the complexities inherent in our society, she notes that similar challenges faced the ancient Greeks. Socrates in Plato’s *Republic Book II* writes, “You know that the beginning of any process is most important, especially for anything young and tender. For it is at that time that it takes shape, and any mould (*sic*) one may want can be impressed upon it.”⁴⁵ Socrates went on to argue that the stories we tell the ‘young and tender’ ought to be the moral bedrock upon which their lives are moored. “Tell children stories of heroes running away from battle, they will run from battle.”⁴⁶ We might argue similarly: tell children stories of their brokenness and unworthiness and that will be their foundational narrative. Alternatively, tell them, again and again, that they are beloved and significant. One can readily see the potential impact of the shift in the child’s foundational self-narrative. My hope is that the family practice of a simple examen allows all members of the family to have their worth underscored.⁴⁷

Part of what ‘colors my lens’ as I approach this exploration and research project is a grounding in the Montessori-inspired practice of Godly Play® both with children and intergenerationally. As a lay minister and parent of adult children who were steeped in

⁴⁴ Jane Roland Martin, *Cultural Miseducation: in Search of a Democratic Solution* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2002), 65.

⁴⁵ Jane Roland Martin quoting Plato’s *Republic Book II* (1974, 377b).

⁴⁶ Jane Roland Martin, 68.

⁴⁷ Gordon L. Flett, “The Psychology of Mattering,” *The Psychology of Mattering*, 2018, pp. 295-305, <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-809415-0.00014-1>. I was introduced to the research around Mattering during the research phase of this project; too late to incorporate into the research design. While there is much to mine, it will be addressed in Chapter 5 as a consideration for further study.

both Godly Play® as well as in the early wave of the ‘digital tsunami’, I have had my antennae attuned to trends that seem to be part of this technology trade-off within families for the last few decades. Because Godly Play® seemed an innovative and transformative approach to religious education when I encountered it more than twenty years ago, I introduce it now for purposes of background and coherence. Jerome Berryman, the founder of Godly Play®, is an Episcopal priest and a keen observer of children in Montessori learning environments. He has been a mentor to me in my practice and thought about Godly Play®. In addition, British theologians David Hay, now deceased, and Rebecca Nye collaborated on the 1998 influential text *The Spirit of the Child*.⁴⁸ Nye continued her research with children and further documented evidence of their spiritual lives in her subsequent book, *Children’s Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*.⁴⁹ In that book, Nye summarized her approach to nurturing children’s spirituality with the acronym SPIRIT (Space, Process, Imagination, Relationship, Intimacy, and Trust.) While I tend toward skepticism of acronyms, Nye’s six aspects provided an interesting and helpful taxonomy for early coding of the data in this research project.

In brief, Godly Play® is used around the world (from Tanzania to Turkey, Alaska to Australia), across denominations (mainline denominations, Church of the Nazarene, Seventh Day Adventists, Friends/Quakers...), and even religions (both Christians and Jews.) It follows Dr. Maria Montessori’s guiding principle that lovingly cultivated spaces alongside well-prepared and caring adult guides support a child’s sensibilities and invite

⁴⁸ David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011).

⁴⁹ Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (London, UK: Church House Publishing, 2017).

them to follow their own inner teacher. Certain ‘disciples’ of Montessori extended her conviction that children are innately spiritual, having many experiences of God but lacking the language or the meta-narrative with which to describe those experiences. Using Montessori’s tenets around creating learning spaces for children and training adults as guides rather than teachers, they fashioned sacred ways of fostering spirituality that suited the sensibilities of children. Jerome Berryman, is one of those ‘disciples.’ While Godly Play® took early shape as bedside pastoral care for families and in a hospital-based classroom environment, today it is most often used as a church-based children’s formation experience, grounded in sharing faith narratives, inviting children to wonder, and offering ‘unplugged’ calm places where children have time to encounter that still small voice and be nourished by it.⁵⁰

In twenty-two years of sitting with circles of children using the Godly Play® approach, I have observed that children today, in general, appear to be less comfortable in making their initial transitions into the Godly Play® experience than they were two decades ago. While the practice of Godly Play® itself has not changed, its environment and circle of participants who share stories, cultivate authentic relationships, and are encouraged to attune to self and others seem to have become countercultural as digital technology (‘screen time’) has assumed more space in the lives of families. Interestingly, I have also noticed that as these same children move from their initial anxious naivete to regular participation in their weekly Sunday morning Godly Play® circles, they are drawn to these same aspects of the Godly Play® that were disorienting to them at first;

⁵⁰ There are many resources to learn more about Godly Play®. [Link here](https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/) for The Godly Play Foundation’s website which has a bibliography, links to video presentations, and other resource material. <https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/>

telling and hearing stories as well as crossing a threshold into and out of a sacred space that is safe, beautiful, intentional, and unplugged.

Godly Play® is not (and should not!) be confined to faith communities alone. In other Eden Theological Seminary coursework, I have critically examined Jerome Berryman's 2018 book *Stories of God at Home*.⁵¹ In it, Berryman retools core stories of the Godly Play® tradition for sharing intergenerationally. Using experiences from his own family to model how conversations might unfold, the book is an excellent resource for experienced Godly Play® practitioners but abstract for uninitiated families who seek a way to talk ritually, regularly, and deeply at home. Ironically, what that book fails to prioritize is what I believe is the heartbeat of Godly Play® – the wondering process. In the most practical of Berryman's volumes on the Godly Play® method, *Teaching Godly Play*, he describes the metaphor of the somersault that happens in the act of wondering during a Godly Play® session. "The wondering involves a shift of consciousness."⁵² Wondering as a predictable and dependable ritual serves as a creative invitation to existential thinking which he calls the "subsidiary knowing" that somersaults to the front of our awareness.⁵³

The four classic 'wondering questions' in Godly Play® are designed to invite those present into a habit of ritual reflection.⁵⁴ The questions' sequencing offers a

⁵¹ Jerome Berryman, *Stories of God at Home: A Godly Play Approach* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2018).

⁵² Berryman, 2009, 67.

⁵³ Jerome W. Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children* (Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2009), 67-8.

⁵⁴ The term "classic" is mine for these questions. They are the foundational questions that follow stories in the Godly Play® Sacred Story genre (narratives from the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament.)

pathway for deeper engagement and theological reflection with the last question fostering an ownership of conclusions. They are:

1. I wonder what part of this story you like the best?
2. I wonder which part is the most important?
3. I wonder which part is about you or has you in it?
4. I wonder which part we can take out and still have all the story that we need?

Chapter 3 will focus on the WTP's methodology and further explicates how these classic wondering questions underpin the ritual and examen in the research project.

Why?: Family Resilience Theory

“A hallmark of a resilient family is direct, clear, consistent, and honest communication and the capacity to tolerate the open expression of emotion.”⁵⁵

In my efforts to mine the current research about the characteristics and practices of families, much of the work I encountered referenced the *Family Resilience Theory* of Froma Walsh, MSW, PhD of the University of Chicago. Her *Family Resilience Framework* is foundational in contemporary family therapy training and is particularly helpful for me in thinking about my research project as it is used both pro-actively in family care and in response to a family's need for help in the event of high stress or trauma.⁵⁶ Unlike the groundbreaking work of psychiatrist Murray Bowen and his *Bowen*

For more on *wondering* in the Godly Play® tradition, see Jerome Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children* (Denver: Morehouse, 2009), 49-50.

⁵⁵ Froma Walsh cited in William R. Saltzman, “The FOCUS Family Resilience Program: An Innovative Family Intervention for Trauma and Loss,” *Family Process* 55, no. 4 (December 13, 2016): pp. 647-659, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12250>, 650.

⁵⁶ Froma Walsh, “Family Resilience: A Framework for Clinical Practice,” *Family Process* 42, no. 1 (2003): pp. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2003.00001.x>, 7.

Family Theory of the 1960's, Walsh's perspective is less about how individual family members adopt particular roles within a family system under stress and more about how the family unit and each of its members can be strengthened in a sense of connection and mutuality. After offering a synopsis of the three key areas organized in Walsh's Family Resilience Framework, I will also share one example of how the framework was employed in a family research project that has some resonance with mine. Because Walsh's framework can be employed both pro-actively and reactively to family stressors, it is germane to my theoretical grounding and methodology in the same way that the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE's) framework felt well-suited; because it accounts for the fact that all families, like individuals evaluated along the ACE's scale, are functioning in a context of stress to varying degrees. Therefore, this is a key lens through which I want to consider how I might best construct a simple examen for families.

Walsh describes three aspects to her framework with each having three associated functions.⁵⁷ The first is **Belief Systems** where she highlights the guiding values of *Making Meaning of Adversity*, holding a *Positive Outlook*, and acknowledging *Transcendence and Spirituality*. Here she encourages caregivers to understand that resilience is relational, that adversity should be contextualized and normalized, and that transformation and a sense of purpose grow from challenges within a family. Walsh writes, “[h]ope is to the spirit what oxygen is to the lungs,” and bases her proposition on

⁵⁷ A comprehensive table of Walsh's Key Processes in Family Resilience can be found on page 7 in Froma Walsh, “Family Resilience: A Framework for Clinical Practice,” *Family Process* 42, no. 1 (2003): pp. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2003.00001.x>, 7.

psychologist Martin Seligman’s research regarding *learned optimism* which came out of his original work on *learned helplessness* in the late 20th century.⁵⁸

The second of Froma Walsh’s three framework foci is **Organizational Patterns**. Herein she underscores *Flexibility, Connectedness, and Social and Economic Resources*. She defines *Flexibility* as “bouncing forward,” meaning how a family reshapes its responses after adversity instead of returning to unhelpful prior practices.⁵⁹ To illustrate the role that family members (especially parents) can play in ensuring stability and continuity during times of disruption, Walsh recounts a movie scene where a recent widower comforts his young daughter with the gift of his ticking watch as a reminder of his constancy even while he travels for work.⁶⁰

Of particular convergence with my thesis is Walsh’s last focus: **Communication-Problem Solving Processes**. Here, Walsh underscores supporting a family in building practices of *Clarity* in their words and actions, valuing *Open Emotional Expression*, and *Collaborative Problem Solving*.⁶¹ While my research proposition is not intended to be family therapy, it does aspire to enhance a family’s communication through narrative and the building of a shared lexicon. Walsh observes that this area of family care is intended to shift a family from existing in a habitual crisis mindset to being proactive and engendering a sense of agency as a family. “Resilient families build on small successes and use failures as learning experiences.”⁶² Walsh’s approach of engaging families with

⁵⁸ Walsh, 8.

⁵⁹ Walsh, 10.

⁶⁰ Walsh, 10.

⁶¹ Walsh, 11-13.

⁶² Walsh, 13.

“respect and compassion for their struggles,” and normalizing the complexities of family life affirms my grounding sense that these stressors might be borne a little more gently with ongoing communication and a steady eye towards hope.⁶³

In my review of the literature, work with American military families provides some of the most compelling research in practices that can enhance a family’s sense of wholeness and assist them in making meaning out of traumatic experiences; helping them in “bouncing forward” as Froma Walsh describes it.⁶⁴ The 2016 research report entitled “The FOCUS Family Resilience Program: An Innovative Family Intervention for Trauma and Loss” by William R. Salzman is especially pertinent in that it uses a narrative sharing process “to reduce distortions and misattributions, and to bridge estrangement between family members.”⁶⁵ Originally utilized by family therapists working with traumatized military families as the result of frequent deployments, Salzman writes of its effectiveness in other at-risk families who access its trained therapists through community mental health services, schools, cancer care centers, and as part of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

FOCUS works by encouraging family members to tell their stories about a shared family trauma or stressor, like deployment or a family member’s illness, with a therapist individually over several sessions. The model provides for the therapist to meet twice with each parent to establish a trusting relationship and delve into their narrative about the trauma from their particular perspective and then the therapist meets twice with the

⁶³ Walsh, 14.

⁶⁴ Walsh, 10.

⁶⁵ Salzman, 647.

child/ren involved to do similar work. After another session with the parent/s to prepare for the family sessions, the family meets together with the therapist three times. Grounded in Family Resilience Theory, the therapists “provide a scaffolding” for these family meetings with the goal of bringing each individual’s siloed stories into a “shared understanding of what they have been through together.”⁶⁶ This short-term intervention has proven to be effective in moving families into a sense of cohesion regarding the traumatic event and a sustained sense of confidence and hope. While my project’s goal is pro-active and not family treatment like Salzman’s FOCUS, I find it affirming that this short-term and narrative-based intervention is “pivotal to a family’s adaptive response to stressful change and trauma.”⁶⁷

How?: Ritual Theory

As noted earlier in this chapter, Edward Foley and Herbert Anderson co-authored an important text in my academic life, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*. I mention it here because their book underscores what I was experiencing as a Christian educator: the importance of creative and sometimes improvised liturgy on one end of the continuum balanced with the repetition and dependability of ongoing rituals. Their book testifies to the rhythm and reliability of ritual as a trust-building and formative experience for all, including families with children.

⁶⁶ Salzman, 650.

⁶⁷ Salzman, 657.

In my work with Godly Play®, our goal is to equip children to enter adolescence with a working knowledge of the Christian language system in all its forms - scripture, prayer, gestures, symbols, beauty, song, movement, silence, and stillness.⁶⁸ Learning this Christian language system happens in many ways but seems to take root most deeply in children who are exposed in repetitive and dependable ways to what their family determines to be of greatest value. In terms of ritual theory as described by Foley, “...(semantic) memory develops through frequent ritual repetition...(and) seldom comes to consciousness.”⁶⁹ In my experience as both a family lay minister and as a parent, children develop deeply held understandings and even make meaning from stories that are repeated ritually. That repetition may be in worship but is often cultivated in a home where families read together or share the stories of their day at the dinner table or in the car. A family’s values can be seen in the way they prioritize certain choices (materialism, social justice, volunteerism, anger, victimization, etc.) These prioritized choices shape the implicit story of a family as clearly as reading the Bible together might.

We see this integration of meaning in the Godly Play® circle of children. The flow of our time together is, itself, ritualized which allows children to learn and integrate cues about transitions and invites each child to participate wholly and with a sense of personal agency. Riffing off Foley’s take on the role of practical theology in his *Ritual Theory* chapter, a dependable ritual for children in a home or worship community *seeks*

⁶⁸ Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: An Imaginative Method for Presenting Scripture Stories to Children*, vol. 8 (Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2012), 159-160.

⁶⁹ Edward Foley, “Ritual Theory,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 143-152, 147-8.

*to model, normalize, and invite embodiment about life and its meaning for people of any age (not just adults.)*⁷⁰

One often unrecognized benefit for families who take the time to tell stories together is the role that this sharing of simple daily narratives plays as a penetrating ritual. These ‘ordinary’ conversations become a nurturing force in the spiritual growth of family members; an invitation to know that we are woven into a greater whole and to find our place in “the great story.”⁷¹ While my research aspires to a shalom for the wider world rather than Christian evangelism, I believe this practice may invite a deepening of connection to the Divine; the unveiling of an unrecognized thirst for God. Like any skill set, if a family talks regularly in a dependable family ritual that dwells in a sense of peace and safety, I believe it will allow them to cultivate the ability to talk deeply. This is what I refer to as their *existential lexicon*. Like breadcrumbs leading us home, talking existentially invites conversation about that which is beyond our knowing. It follows that families who take time for regular and intentional connection are also modeling the value of a quiet, discerning heart and the cultivated skill of listening for that “still small voice” where one’s spirit may behold their deepest truths, appreciate the truths that other family members share, and, perhaps, encounter the God they are not even aware that they seek.⁷²

⁷⁰ Foley, 148.

⁷¹ Elaine Reese, “What Kids Learn from Hearing Family Stories,” *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2013.

⁷² 1 Kings 19:12 (RSV)

How?: Ignatian Spirituality (The Examen)

The ritual practice that this study employs was inspired and informed by the Ignatian tradition of the Examination of Conscious (the *examen*); what Jesuit scholar Dennis Hamm called “rummaging for God” by looking for places of consolation (where God feels close) and desolation (where God feels distant) at the end of each day.^{73 74} The broader interpretation of the examen may be understood as noticing the places of *lightness and darkness* or *engagement and boredom* during the day. Originally a practice of the Jesuit religious done in private, it has been hybridized, secularized, and reconsidered in a variety of ways for individuals, dyads, and groups. One of the simplest modern expressions is “where was a rose in your day and where was a thorn?”⁷⁵ Here I will review the foundational and re-interpreted contemporary variations on the examen to illustrate how the Godly Play® wondering questions might function as a contemporary examen for families with or without a religious affiliation or spiritual vocabulary.

The examen (pronounced ‘examine’ in English) is the Spanish term for the aforementioned Examination of Consciousness which was developed by the Spanish founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, in the 16th century.⁷⁶ An injury in battle invited this Basque nobleman into a serious reading of the Bible during his recovery and a

⁷³ Dennis Hamm, “Rummaging for God,” *America*, May 14, 1994, pp. 22-23.

⁷⁴ The Society of Jesus is the monastic order founded by Ignatius of Loyola, also known as “the Jesuits.”

⁷⁵ Some extend the practice with a third question that asks, “Where was the bud in your day?” Argos Gonzalez, “A Mindful Way to Reflect: Rose, Thorn, and Bud,” *Mindful Schools*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/mindful-reflection/>.

⁷⁶ Donald Saint Louis, “The Ignatian Examen: A Method of Theological Reflection,” *The Way. Supplement* 55, 1986, pp. 66-76, 87.

reconstitution of his Christian faith followed. Inspired by this experience, he authored and mentored both lay and clerical Christians in the *Spiritual Exercises*, a 40-day retreat designed to help one discern how God is moving in their life.⁷⁷ The examen is a prayer practice employed several times daily throughout the Spiritual Exercises retreat as well as a ritual daily (or twice daily) experience that stands alone. The examen is comprised of five prayerful steps:

1. **Gratitude for “benefits” of the day.** Ignatius directed the prayer to be one of savoring whatever arose as one entered the first stage of the prayer. Nothing is too small to hold in gratitude.
2. **The grace to know one’s sins.** In short, to acknowledge when you turned away from doing what you know to be right.
3. **Review the day.** This is at the core of the practice and that with which practitioners often feel most connected. Fr. James Martin describes it as letting a movie of the day play in your head.⁷⁸
4. **Ask the Lord to pardon one’s faults.**
5. **As for God’s help and grace to “amend” one’s sins.** Roman Catholics are invited to follow their *examen* with an “Our Father.”⁷⁹

In a 1950 diary entry, American social activist Dorothy Day noted that she was faithful to the Ignatian charge to two examens a day, 15 minutes each. She describes her approach to the five steps thusly:

1. Thank God for favors.
2. Beg for light {that is, the grace to see clearly}
3. Survey
4. Repent

⁷⁷ While the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises are a significant resource in personal and vocational Christian discernment, a brief review here is neither illustrative nor pertinent. The “Exercises” are bound to the *examen* as part of the prayerful reflective process throughout the experience. It is relevant that Ignatius developed an alternate 40-week format for the Exercises to enable the laity to experience them. In 2006, I undertook the 40-week experience. See James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012), 19-21.

⁷⁸ When I was trained in the practice, the invitation was to review my day with a heart set to recognize the places of consolation, followed by a second review with my heart set to recognize the places of desolation.

⁷⁹ James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: a Spirituality for Real Life* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012), 88-92.

5. Resolve ⁸⁰

Contemporary American Jesuit priest and popular author James Martin outlines his personal examen as five steps, too, but notes that before starting, one should begin with the reminder that you are in God's presence and ask for God to help you pray the prayer:

1. Gratitude (give thanks for that which you are particularly grateful from the day)
2. Review the day
3. Sorrow (For which actions are you sorry?)
4. Forgiveness (Ask for God's forgiveness. Decide whether you want to reconcile with anyone you have hurt.)
5. Grace (Ask for grace in the next day and an "ability to see God's presence more clearly.") ⁸¹

Here, I have presented three different variations of the examen from the Roman Catholic perspective to illustrate how malleable it is in the hands of traditional practitioners while retaining its core disciplines – the invitation to distill consolation and desolation, and to appreciate that God is often easier to recognize in hindsight. ⁸² “The criteria for hearing the voice of God, as Ignatius did, is not holiness but rather the willingness to become aware.”⁸³ Sr. Elizabeth Liebert adds “(t)he point of this exercise in its many variations is to see our lives just as they are, the very place where God is already present and active and inviting us to greater life.”⁸⁴ Sr. Liebert offers the examen as one

⁸⁰ James Martin, 96.

⁸¹ James Martin, 97.

⁸² James Martin, 97.

⁸³ Dennis Linn et al., *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 63.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth A. Liebert, “Accessible Spiritual Practices to Aid in Recovery from Moral Injury,” *Pastoral Psychology* 68, no. 1 (June 21, 2018): pp. 41-57, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-018-0825-1>, 53.

of four spiritual practices reinterpreted from their explicitly religious origins as a way to help rebuild the wounds of moral injury. Her recent research focuses on members of the military, their families, and other individuals that encircle them. As I write this in 2021, I wonder how Sr. Leibert's work may be a timely resource for caregivers experiencing significant and life-altering moral injury as a result of the COVID pandemic.

Joel Boehner was an educator at Bethel College, an Anabaptist university in North Newton, Kansas. An instructor for 'remedial' students there, Boehner taught an ungraded class called Academic Strategies, which helped underprepared students develop the skills necessary for eventual degree completion despite challenging "deficits in knowledge or behavior."⁸⁵ After happening upon a breakout session at an educational conference, Boehner was introduced to the Ignatian examen and identified it as a tool for his students. He instructed them in the five steps of the conventional practice and offered it at each class via PowerPoint slides. Unsure how his students would respond, he invited them to engage in the examen during class by journaling their responses to each of the five slides. Students identified recurring themes that they would turn into action plans in two week increments throughout the semester, culminating in a 'change portfolio' at the term's end. Boehner found the use of the examen offered his students the skills to engage in self-reflection rather than being told that they were expected to reflect without any instruction on how to do so.⁸⁶ He also discovered that the Ignatian examen "parallels the methods of liberation theology," including cultivating a deeper awareness of cause and

⁸⁵Joel Boehner, "Praying for Change: The Ignatian examen in the 'Remedial' Classroom," *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 16, no. 2 (September 1, 2012): pp. 215-227, <https://doi.org/10.1177/205699711201600206>, 215-6.

⁸⁶ Boehner, 225.

effect.⁸⁷ Boehner's experience illustrates several elements I considered as I distilled my thesis question; that the regular practice of the examen in a supportive setting allows one to develop skills of self-awareness, critical thinking, and realize idiosyncratic truths that enliven both self and community.

While Leibert and Boehner's reinterpretation of the examen is targeted to a specific population, I turn to what I consider to be the seminal book on the accessible examen for all comers - *Sleeping with Bread*, by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn.^{88 89} Devoted Roman Catholics, the Linns offer a personal account of how they have used and adapted the examen in their personal lives as missionaries and social activists. In their work, they have invited people whom they have encountered around the world to join them in praying the examen together. Their book is born of these experiences.

In one iteration of their adapted examen, they distill its essence into two questions which they find to easily cross cultural and age boundaries:⁹⁰

- "For what am I most grateful?"
- "For what am I least grateful?"

They cite other variations of the examen:⁹¹

- "When did I give and receive the most love today?... the least love?"
- "When did I feel most alive today? When did I most feel life draining out of me?"

⁸⁷ Boehner, 225.

⁸⁸ Dennis Linn et al., "Part 1: The examen," in *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Paulist Press, 1995), pp. 5-30.

⁸⁹ Matthew Linn is a Roman Catholic priest who offers retreats of faithful practices worldwide with his brother, Dennis Linn, and Dennis' spouse, Sheila Fabricant Linn.

⁹⁰ Linn et al., 6.

⁹¹ Linn et al., 7.

- “When did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe? ... the least sense of belonging?”
- “When was I happiest? When was I saddest?”
- “What was today’s high point? What was today’s low point?”⁹²

The Linns underscore the examen as a tool for discernment – to understand the will of God in their daily lives.⁹³ They also write from their three different perspectives about how the examen is enhanced when done in the company of others. They take great care in closing each examen in thanks for the experience, the presence of God, and one another.⁹⁴

I would like to offer a personal story to illustrate how the sublime simplicity of the examen is mirrored in the Godly Play® wondering questions. In 2007, I had completed forty weeks moving through the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, had been to a daylong examen workshop with the Linns that was soul-stirring, was sitting monthly with a spiritual director, and anchoring the Godly Play® program at our church in Mill Valley, California. Sitting in Godly Play® circles of children weekly and wondering with them about whatever story had been presented became way more than a typical Sunday morning formation experience. Returning to the same setting and repeating the same ritual patterns and language together, we became a little community of seekers, connected through years and experience together. It was quite ordinary for me to ask, “I wonder what part of the story you liked best,” and hear thoughts about school, dynamics at home, and the miracles of nature. Often children would say, “I am waiting for you to ask about the part we could take out... I have been waiting all week to share something!” One day,

⁹² Linn et al., 7.

⁹³ Linn et al., 18.

⁹⁴ Linn et al., 22-30.

out of the blue, I had the heady awareness that when we came together and wondered each week, we had birthed a communal weekly *examen*. In thirteen more years as a Godly Play practitioner and trainer, I am even more convinced that the way the wondering questions coalesce becomes an examen that is as accessible for children as it is for adults, a compelling framework for this simple family ritual.

Neurobiology, Narrative and Ritual Theory, Children's Spirituality, Family Resilience Theory, and the Ignatian Examen meld in a research question that was originally grounded in Christian ministry but now has morphed into a practical, integrated theology which prioritizes healthy family function and mutual support over a particular form of evangelism. Encouraged by the pertinent research in these fields and the grounding theories therein, I am curious if a tried-and-true practice reimagined for 21st century families addresses a hunger, finds a home, and opens a space for the sacred to dwell in whatever way meets the shared ethos and mythos of a family; seeking *shalom* for the world and trusting that God will make God's self known in unique and unexpected ways.

Chapter 3

Observing Wondering: Methodology and Research Design

In this chapter, I will look at my research question again; this time through the lens of a particular methodology - ethnography - and the architecture of its associated research design.

*If a family adopts a habit of communal examen,
will the practice enhance their existential and spiritual lexicon?*

Restated in the vernacular,

*If a family checks in daily when things are 'normal,' will that make it easier to talk
about the 'big things' when they happen?*

After a focused overview of ethnography, I will offer a description of the research design as anticipated in the original Wondering Together Project (WTP) proposal and several accommodations made during the COVID-era. My goal is to explicate why ethnography as a methodological framework is well suited to this project and how I have worked to develop a research design that is manageable for a novice ethnographer and meets the expectations of our institution, myself, and, most importantly, the families that agreed to participate. One particular aspect of ethnography is worth highlighting here: because of its observational nature, the shape of the design often shifts somewhat during the research period in response to what the researcher understands to be unfolding. This project was designed, proposed, and accepted before the COVID pandemic and executed during 2021. Some adjustments to the original design were made to accommodate the

conditions of the unusual study period. Ethnography is dynamic and organic in its design while holding the researcher to methodological and ethical rigor.⁹⁵ I am fortunate that its ethnographic foundation allowed the project to adapt while preserving fidelity to the original design.

Ethnography

Ethnography originated as an anthropological method for the “investigation of essentially oral cultures,” in the 19th century.⁹⁶ Because it strives to describe a group or a people observed from within, it is well suited to sociological, educational, and pastoral research contexts. There is no single definition of ethnography as a methodology. There is, however, a great deal of commonality in its description across disciplines. The most common characterization I encountered in attempting to crystallize the method was that ethnography requires the researcher to report with “thick description” that which they are observing.⁹⁷ All agree that ethnography strives to describe and contextualize where other methodologies might simply report.

Primarily qualitative, ethnographic research explores people and cultures from within their habitus. Researchers often embed to some extent with those they study in order to adequately understand, chronicle, and narrate what they perceive to be at work in the

⁹⁵ Margaret Diane LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Ethics in Ethnography a Mixed Methods Approach* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2015), 251.

⁹⁶ Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 1996), 157.

⁹⁷ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 197-8.

experience of the people and cultures that they are observing.⁹⁸ Awareness and acknowledgement of the intimacy between the observer and the subject, *reciprocity*, is a hallmark of this methodology and requires the researcher and the study design to acknowledge and account for the impact that the researcher's presence has on those being studied. In addition, an ethnographer arrives to the research with certain assumptions or theories and is challenged to remain as open-minded and flexible as possible.⁹⁹ If "ethnography is the study of human behavior while keeping a naïve mind," the invitation is to hold the required naivete in tension with the hunches that brought you to the research in the first place; to allow insights to guide you but not lead you forward.¹⁰⁰

The ethnographer's vigilance around reciprocity is counterbalanced in the ongoing practice of *recursivity*. Recursivity is the cyclical willingness to be attentive to what is being observed, reconsidering the next steps, and making shifts in research based on those next steps and their anticipated outcomes.¹⁰¹ Together, recursivity and reciprocity comprise the ongoing personal and process reflections that undergird and guide the ethnographer.¹⁰²

Ethnography is rooted in relationships and bears witness to the human experience. This invites me, as the researcher, to introduce and support the research subjects

⁹⁸ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 1-2.

⁹⁹ Sally Campbell Galman, *Shane, The Lone Ethnographer: A Beginner's Guide to Ethnography* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 20.

¹⁰⁰ Ellen Isaacs, "Ethnography" (lecture, TED X Broadway, New York, NY, March 1, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV0jY5VgymI>.

¹⁰¹ LeCompte and Schensul, *Ethics in Ethnography*, 251.

¹⁰² LeCompte and Schensul, *Ethics in Ethnography*, 251-2.

(‘families’) in the Wondering Together ritual practice and, subsequently, to analyze, interpret, and report the more human, complex, and idiosyncratic aspects of my research findings. Together, the quantitative and descriptive aspects of ethnography encourage a comprehensive and nuanced approach to a research project like this that is rooted in family rituals and the potential value of reclaiming narrative practices. Functionally, ethnographic research “tends to evolve and shift as you engage in it.”¹⁰³ This is evident in the addition of a fifth wondering question that I will detail later in this chapter.

Utilizing the lens of pastoral ethnographer Mary Clark Moschella, this research project is best categorized as an ethnographic study based on a predictive question (i.e., “how does *this* impact *that*?”)¹⁰⁴ Other questions that ethnography may seek to address include *How did this come to be?* Or *How does this compare to that?* Or *How does this work?*¹⁰⁵ Methodologically, ethnography suits my particular research question best as it is both relational and measurable. It is specific, providing for data collection, measurement, and analysis via survey instruments. I collected specific demographic information, coded for trends in individual and family responses to the Wondering Together practice, and will report in Chapter 4 on perceived and observed impact. Quantitative data supplements qualitative data and renders a report focused on the perceived impact of a family’s experience with a new ritual practice. Later in this chapter, I will outline the particular selections I have made in the research design.

¹⁰³ Moschella, 61.

¹⁰⁴ Moschella, 77.

¹⁰⁵ Moschella, 64-76

If culture in ethnography is a lens for understanding, then the acts of intentional listening - both within the context of the wondering together practice and by me as the researcher - are the primary apertures and angles within that lens.¹⁰⁶ As this act of listening is deeply respectful and affirms each speaker's value, its role as the key research instrument and data collection tool is integral to my position as invested investigator. "Most people long to be heard."¹⁰⁷ This truth is especially pertinent to the nature of this research question and this type of research project – the value of coming together in a ritual practice of reflection and being affirmed in the act of being heard. One father appreciated that the Wondering Together Project offered him the opportunity "to have the floor" once a day in his family.¹⁰⁸ In her excellent chapter on pastoral listening in ethnography, Mary Clark Moschella lifts up Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.¹⁰⁹ In my subsequent review of Friere, I was reminded of my own pedagogy that was shaped by Montessori and Berryman's view of children and how it aligns with the liberation theory of Friere. Children do not arrive as empty vessels but shaped through dialogue with teachers (and I extend Friere's thinking to trusted adults). "[Children and adults] become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow."¹¹⁰ While the WTP is conducted within a secular framework, the ethnographer's deep regard

¹⁰⁶ Moschella, 28.

¹⁰⁷ Moschella, 141.

¹⁰⁸ Father of Pink Family speaking at exit interview on February 14, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Moschella, 151.

¹¹⁰ Márquez Iván and Paulo Friere, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," in *Contemporary Latin American Social and Political Thought: An Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 168.

and appreciation for the act of listening underscores it as a pastoral act. “Ethnographic listening involves suspending judgement and going for fuller understanding instead.”¹¹¹

Other ethnographic practices that enhance the cultural lens through which its subjects are viewed, interpreted, and understood include observation in a non-laboratory setting, interviews, artifacts, field notes, quantitative data collections (e.g. surveys and questionnaires), and the awareness that the researcher serves as the primary tool for data collection.¹¹² These practices will be detailed as I offer an overview of the WTP’s research design.

Research Design

Before I examine the nuances of the research design, I offer three reflections from just beyond the research itself. First, building a ritual structure requires both safety (boundaries, beginnings, endings, predictability, etc.) as well as risk.¹¹³ 20th century American psychologist Abraham Maslow observed that higher ordered thinking and any associated action required the satisfaction of one’s physical needs and the assurance of a sense of safety before proceeding.¹¹⁴ My experience suggests this to be true, especially when asking families to participate in a research activity. Notes for each family interaction, especially the initial meeting, included clearly outlining their commitment in

¹¹¹ Moschella, 143.

¹¹² Margaret Diane LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Designing & Conducting Ethnographic Research: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2010), 12.

¹¹³ Hogue, 164-6.

¹¹⁴ Frederick D. Harper, Jacqueline A. Harper, and Aaron B. Stills, “Counseling Children in Crisis Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Basic Needs,” *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 17.

time and energy, their freedom to ask questions or leave the project, and that I was devoted to being scrupulous about protecting their privacy. I believe this established me as a trustworthy researcher, as evidenced by my transparency around confidentiality and clarity around the research commitment. I strove to be a respectful researcher as well; respectful in that I offered an implicit and explicit message that I was grateful for their time and earnest in my partnership with them in the Wondering Together Project.

Also, it became clear to me after the first family interview that I needed to operate in harmony with my own ethos. This research was born out of my practical theological experience and hope that the ritual might serve as an authentic bridge to an awareness of the movement of something universal in the life of a family. I have been clear that the Wondering Together Project is not designed to be overtly or covertly evangelical. And yet, prayer was essential to grounding me in the research. I included time for prayer daily and before each interview, even though I was committed to the Wondering Together Project being “spiritually agnostic” in its invitation to participating families. It was a comfort to add each of the families to my daily prayer list and to pray before each interaction using a modified Prayer of Abandonment ascribed to Brother Charles of Jesus.¹¹⁵ I had used the prayer in its original form throughout my forty weeks of living the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, so it seemed appropriate to call upon it once again.¹¹⁶ I also found it important to maintain monthly spiritual direction and psychotherapy appointments to ensure that I was as self-aware as possible through the process.

¹¹⁵ Charles de Foucauld b.1858-d.1916.

¹¹⁶ The Prayer of Abandonment in its original and modified form is found as Appendix A.

Finally, ethnography is a relational endeavor, resulting in a co-creation between researcher and participants. Inherent in the method is circling back with ‘key informants’ whenever feasible to serve as a check on researcher bias.¹¹⁷ In May 2021 when the data analysis was complete, I shared the draft of Chapter 4 (“The Wondering Together Project: Data Analysis”) and pertinent appendices with the eleven families who completed the research experience. It was an opportunity to check my interpretations for accuracy and resonance with family members as well as to offer my thanks again several months after the Wondering Together Project had ended.

Human Subjects Considerations

The human subject research considerations for the Wondering Together Project were designed as outlined by Eden Theological Seminary and approved by the Doctor of Ministry Committee in February 2020 in conjunction with the approval of the project proposal. The project was deemed ‘high risk’ on the Assessment of Risk to Human Subjects in Research after evaluating the proposal via a tool developed by and with the consent of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.¹¹⁸ This risk rating reflects the challenge and responsibility of including children under the age of 18 years within the cohort as well as the reality that participants are asked to do a degree of personal reflection during the research experience. For me as sole researcher, the designation conferred a solemn duty to ensure the respect and protection for those participating,

¹¹⁷ LeCompte and Schensul, *Ethics in Ethnography*, 264.

¹¹⁸ The Assessment of Risk to Human Subjects in Research for this project is found as Appendix B.

especially children, while assuming a mantle of “vulnerable observer.”¹¹⁹ For example, I was careful to plan that children would be in the company of at least one parent or caregiver whenever interacting with me, even while dialoguing on Zoom. There were never any episodes of private conversation between me and a participating child, which ensured that there were no opportunities for misunderstanding or concern about my motives or intent. As I conducted the initial interview, I was careful to explain to each family how I would work to protect their confidential information and how I would maintain anonymity in reporting (each family choose their own color ‘code name.’) At no time were photos or images of family members requested. Even though this risk category requires parental or guardian informed consent for any participating child under the age of 18 years, the best ethical practices required me be meticulous in the project design to be as subjectively accountable as possible during the research period. I believe that I was true to that covenant.

Cohort Enrollment

As the focus of this research is families with children, participating families were to have had a minimum of one parent or guardian and one child under the age of 18 living in the home. Families with non-verbal child/ren or infant/s were included within the cohort parameters because the research project was interested in the perceived benefit of the practice for the family. Therefore, it was worthwhile if any family incorporated the ritual into their daily lives as the WTP examined the practice’s impact regardless of a

¹¹⁹ Mai-Ahn Li Tran, *Human Subjects Research* (2016), Eden Theological Seminary <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4cfa3h65ZQ>, 1:02:10.

child's capacity to respond verbally. As per the original research design, a cohort of 8-12 families was proposed to participate for a one-month study period. This sample size was both realistic to enroll for this project and large enough to exhibit findings that are specific and may suggest trends. Moschella notes that a smaller sample size is valid as its relational nature can parse nuanced understandings of a predictive practice.¹²⁰

The original plan prior to the 2020-2021 COVID pandemic was to enroll families by invitation through three entry points:

1. Invitation after I presented the workshop on *Reconnect! Wondering Together as a Family* at the Wild Goose Festival, July 9-12, 2020, in Hot Springs, North Carolina.
2. Invitation to families who live in Squirrel Island, Maine during the summer of 2020.
3. Invitation to families who self-identify as interested through Godly Play® events and through connections made via my Godly Play® colleagues.

Due to the pandemic, I was delayed in the enrollment, largely because the planned events and opportunities in 2020 evaporated. Therefore, I developed an informational website in January 2021 and began to share it with personal and professional colleagues I hoped would forward the information to families they thought might be interested.¹²¹ By mid-February 2021, 8 families with minor children had enrolled and begun their one-month research period. Three additional families who did not have children or children under the age of 18 living at home asked for the opportunity to participate. With their consent and understanding that they were demographically outliers of the original research design, these families were enrolled into the cohort. While I awaited the start of the research, my twenty-nine-year-old daughter and her thirty-five-year-old spouse

¹²⁰ Moschella, 78.

¹²¹ <https://sites.google.com/view/wonderingtogetherproject/home>

expressed an interest in participating and were willing to serve in the role of ‘guinea pig’. They participated in all aspects of the project (consents, opening interview and training, weekly check-ins, closing interview) and associated data was collected.

In addition, one church sought permission to collaborate with the Wondering Together Project and use it as a Lenten parish-wide practice. It was agreed that they would adapt the questions and offer supplies of their own making. No families or individuals were enrolled into the WTP’s research cohort.¹²² That church, St. Stephen’s Episcopal in Cohasset, Massachusetts, agreed to provide me with any anonymous feedback that they collected from their parishioners for the purposes of additional data that was not expressly applicable to this research project.

While I worried initially that it might be challenging to enroll families, I was fortunate to do so within five weeks of beginning recruitment. If a family expressed interest but did not respond once I had replied to their email, text, or call, I did not pursue their enrollment. I did not want any participant to feel pressured or coerced to participate. One family completed the demographic form but not the consents. In that unique case, I did reach out once to ascertain their interest and answer questions but did not receive any further communication from them. The final family to enroll, the ‘Cyan’ family, completed the consent forms within a day and participated in the initial family Zoom meeting. As I will document in the following chapter, the Cyans did not join our second scheduled Zoom and stopped communicating with me thereafter. This was the only family who began the WTP but did not complete it.

¹²² A copy of the letter to the parish and a photo of the materials for the parish to use are attached as Appendix C.

Once the cohort was filled, I found that other families expressed interest in participating. This echoed Anderson and Foley's account of the Rwandan women and the story tree. It took time for the women to trust that the opportunity was available to share their stories safely but once they did, the women kept on coming!¹²³

Duration

The Wondering Together Project asked families to participate for a month. The study participants were considered enrolled when they had contacted me, had the opportunity to express interest and ask questions by email or by Zoom, and then completed the demographic form and appropriate consent forms. The research period began at the time of our initial Zoom meeting and ended four weeks later. Due to scheduling issues, some families study periods were longer.

The one-month long time frame was chosen to cultivate ritual integration but not extend the research period excessively whereby the subjects may experience research fatigue. My review of the literature regarding the incorporation of new habits suggested that new family practices do not follow a prescribed formula.¹²⁴ I had subjectively chosen the one-month period as it would allow for personal and communal experience with the practice and give an early indication as to whether the introduction of this ritual may have long-term impact.

¹²³ Anderson and Foley, 3.

¹²⁴ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and in Business* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), 100-101.

Context and Interview Conditions

The research contexts were multi-site (family homes or sites of their choosing) and multi-media (Zoom, with additional phone calls, texts, or emails.) All but two initial or concluding family interviews were by Zoom from my office while the families were at their homes. During weekly check-ins, some interviews happened when a parent was at their place of work or even in their car. In-person interviews were imprudent due to the pandemic and because the cohort was located across the country (California, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Massachusetts, Maine, and New York.) All participating family members were present for the initial and closing interviews. Weekly check-ins were often with one parent. In the case of the three families that did not have children under 18 years at home, each participated with all enrolled family members present for each of their five interview opportunities. Quite often the family pets felt comfortable in the Zoom encounters and were welcome participants.

At no time did I explicitly express any expectation of positive feedback to satisfy or please me as the researcher. On the project's website, I noted, "I hope your family will enjoy it and find it valuable, but we all know that not everything works for every family! That's okay and expected in research like this. So, if it is not enjoyable or helpful, that is good for me as a researcher to hear about, too. No worries."¹²⁵ I strove to repeat this at the first and closing family meetings and was grateful for all the feedback that this honest invitation engendered. As with any ethnographic research project, the researcher's

¹²⁵ Paragraph 3 of [homepage](#) of Wondering Together Project.

reciprocity and recursivity require ongoing attention especially when one is invested in the outcome of a causal research question.

In addition, I was careful to try and be open and transparent without telegraphing any kind of real or perceived reward associated with this process. Educator Elliot Eisner observed that rewards when paired with learning come with “hidden costs” that often include compliant behavior which would be antithetical to the spirit of this research project.¹²⁶ While I hoped the ritual practice would enhance a family’s experience, I was careful not to make any promises based on my thesis. During weekly check-ins, I found myself encouraging families to simply look for what changed or shifted from week to week as a way to safeguard myself from a sense of celebration when a family reported that they were valuing the experience.

Consents, Data Gathering, and Information Security

The consent forms for the Wondering Together Project were replicated and customized from those offered in the Human Subjects Research Protocol outlined by Eden Theological Seminary. There is the option for consent to be made electronically which this project utilized.¹²⁷ ¹²⁸ Moschella suggests that ethnographers offer additional

¹²⁶ Elliot W. Eisner, “The Three Curricula That All Schools Teach,” in *The Educational Imagination: on the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), pp. 89-90.

¹²⁷ The online version of the adult consent form may be accessed at [this link](#) and a copy of the same is also offered as Appendix D.

¹²⁸ The online version of the minor consent form may be accessed at [this link](#) and a copy of the same is also offered as Appendix E.

specifics on disclosure.¹²⁹ To this end, a straightforward description of the research process was on the project's webpage, in initial informational emails, and made verbally at the initial family meeting for intake and training.¹³⁰ I also offered my contact information as a signature line on all emails with families as well as on the aforementioned webpage. For families who preferred texting, they had access to my cell phone number. I ended each interaction with an invitation to reach out with any questions or issues. The American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics notes that ethnographic consent is "continuous and incremental."¹³¹ I worked to be consistent in my invitation to ask questions and be open and honest in both feedback and the sharing of any issues or concerns. In the process, I had a great deal of forthright feedback from families but never sensed or heard of any emerging discomfort with the Wondering Together Project's research process.

Confidentiality and anonymity were paramount. To that end, I assured confidentiality on the consent forms as well as reviewing how I planned to ensure that confidentiality as part of each initial session that I had with families. At that first meeting, each family was asked to choose an identifying color that would be their 'code name' for the research.¹³² I used this code name in scheduling Zoom meetings, making field notes, and in the subject lines of any emails. In addition, once a family had expressed their interest in participating, I did not circle back with our connecting reference person or

¹²⁹ Moschella, 92-3.

¹³⁰ The information flyer attached to initial contact emails is offered here as Appendix F.

¹³¹ Moschella, 100.

¹³² One family member chose the code name "Mr. Beast Family" instead of a color and we used that instead. All other code names are colors.

source. Additionally, I made the following provisions to ensure confidentiality of research information in accordance with seminary policy:

1. Copies of all consent forms made via Google were downloaded to a password protected, cloud-based document manager (Dropbox.)
2. All field and interview notes were made on a password protected excel file.
3. Voice recording of interviews were downloaded to Dropbox after being transcribed by 'Transcribe,' a phone-based application. Transcribed conversations were located in a Dropbox file for coding after initially being forwarded to an email box marked 'Eden Transcriptions.'
4. All email correspondence was moved to a password protected email file marked 'Eden Data.'
5. All text-based correspondence was copied and pasted into the designated tab for each family on the password protected research excel spread sheet.
6. In conferring with statistician Niesa Ryder, I shared the data sample with only color code names as identifiers.
7. The Wondering Together Project will be completed at the time of my oral presentation to Eden faculty and students in May 2022. Once approved, all data noted above will be downloaded and placed on a hard drive in a secure, locked box for ten years. It will be available to access if further analysis of this research project is indicated within those ten years. After ten years, it will be destroyed.

Family Interviews

The Wondering Together Project required five episodes of contact with each family.¹³³

- (15-30 minutes) The Initial Introduction was focused on training in the ritual and all participating family members were present. (For some families with young children, the children played nearby while I spent time dialoguing with the parent/s.) Each meeting involved the following aspects, but the order was not always the same.
 - a. Introductions and getting to know a bit about each other.
 - b. Overview of the Wondering Together Project including identifying a ritual time and place, silencing distractions including phones and computers, taking turns asking the questions, and reiterating that responding was optional. I offered suggestions for gentle invitations to

¹³³ Appendix J outlines the interview questions for each of the five weeks.

- mark the ritual's beginning and end like lighting a candle, holding hands, and/or taking a deep breath together.¹³⁴
- c. Practicing the wondering questions. Often, we used the family pet (if there was one) to practice. (e.g. "Spot, what was your favorite part of the day?" A child might respond "Playing with my ball under the table." And we would cycle through the four original wondering questions, modeling the practice.)
 - d. Thanking them for participating in the research and their commitment thereto. I would review the ways I worked to ensure confidentiality.
 - e. Asking if they would like me to mail a Wondering Stone (the four original questions imprinted on a stone coaster.)
 - f. Answering any current questions and inviting them to be in touch with any questions that arose.
 - g. Deciding how best to check in after their first week of Wondering Together.
- (5-10 minutes if in person) Check-In's #1-3 after one, two, and three weeks of participating in the practice. These were either done by Zoom, email, text, or a combination depending on the family. Often, one adult conveyed how things were going and answered a few prescribed questions that I asked via Zoom or email.
 - (15-30 minutes) The Final Gathering/Exit Interview was by Zoom with the whole family.
 - a. We began by checking as to how the previous week of wondering had been.
 - b. Then we dialogued using these three questions:
 - i. I wonder what you have learned about yourselves and your family since you've been wondering together?
 - ii. I wonder if you will keep on wondering? Why or why not?
 - iii. Do you think that doing this WTP everyday makes it easier to talk about big stuff when that happens in your family? (Often, I would give examples of 'big stuff' as winning the lottery or if your pet or a special person died.)
 - c. I always closed with a sincere thank-you for their time and investment and sent a personal note of thanks by mail within a week.

¹³⁴ Both the Linns and Elizabeth Leibert suggest that lighting a candle helps mark the entry and exit from the examen. However, I did not feel this would appeal to all families so only offered it as one of several examples.

Research Design and Redesign: A Fifth Question

Earlier in this chapter, I alluded to the addition of a fifth question to the four initial wondering questions. This addition is a prime example of the unfolding of the ethnographic method in this project. “The art of pastoral ethnography is adaptive in that it involves recognizing and getting on board with the wisdom that emerges ... This wisdom cannot be known in advance... [it] emerges over time in the context of the particularity of the people and relationships being formed.”¹³⁵ What I was sensing and hearing in the first and second week feedback from the earliest participants was their dis-ease with the final question (“I wonder what part of today you would have liked to leave out?”)¹³⁶ While I will address this in more detail in the following chapter, it seemed that this question felt challenging, even depressing, as the final question of the series; especially when the daily practice was, otherwise, feeling like a valuable family ritual. The Cobalt Family took the initiative to change the order of the questions to avoid ending with the fourth question while some other families expressed their discomfort more subtly or did so in retrospect after the addition of the fifth question. Mary Clark Moschella describes the need to find comfort in the fact that ethnographic research “tends to evolve and shift as you engage in it.”¹³⁷ I understood the trend and wondered why I had not anticipated this reaction, but I was conflicted. My experience with the fourth question in all the years of using it in Godly Play® reinforced its value, especially as a question that served a crystallizing role

¹³⁵ Moschella, 242.

¹³⁶ The original Godly Play® version of this Sacred Story genre wondering question is phrased “I wonder what part of this story you would have liked to leave out and still have all the story you need?”

¹³⁷ Moschella, 61.

when preceded by the other three. What I did not account for initially was that there was no trained guide who was comfortable holding space and modeling trust in the discomfort of this challenging question as there is in the Godly Play® circle. I felt clear that the question needed to remain and any subsequent question that I added should not serve as an antidote or ‘fix’ to the challenge of the fourth question. That would compromise its unique role in the sequence and its ability to distill deeper truths.

I responded by offering this optional fifth question at the two-week point, halfway through the research period: “I wonder how you are feeling in this moment?” I was careful to explain to families that it was optional and that it was the only addition to the practice that would be offered. This question was chosen for two reasons. First, I had considered it before the research started following a conversation with my Godly Play® trainer colleague, Toni Daniels, but was unconvinced that the question would be additive on balance. Second, the research on the neurobiology of stress reduction (as evidenced by lowering one’s cortisol level when naming one’s present emotion) that I described in Chapter 2 was top of mind. Checking in with how everyone gathered was feeling seemed like an additional opportunity to attune with self and the others who gathered. As Moschella noted, there is a wisdom in appreciating what is working and being sensitive to what is not.¹³⁸

Quantitative Data Gathering

All participating families completed one demographic information form on-line. These forms were downloaded from Google docs at the completion of the research period

¹³⁸ Moschella, 164.

and saved as per the other forms. The content of this form was approved at the time of the project proposal.¹³⁹

Occasionally a family would send a photo of an artifact that coincided with the project. I cataloged them when they arrived and share them here in the Family Portraits Appendix. At no time did I ask for or take any photographic or video images of any participants.

Qualitative Data Gathering

Qualitative data gathering included deeply listening during Zoom sessions and asking clarifying questions throughout the process if I had an interior sense that I was not clear on a point being made. “Just so I am certain I understand what you mean...” was often how I began these follow-up questions. Also important were field notes taken to supplement audio recordings as well as subjective notes taken at the close of an interview and after I coded each transcript. These notes catalogued how I was feeling and what was stirring in me. When I observed certain family circumstances that rang true or struck a chord in me, I tried to acknowledge them interiorly in an effort not to let them confuse the data being offered. I found that it was prudent to schedule an hour for each interview or interaction each week even though the interactions rarely took more than 25 minutes. This allowed time to pray, interact, document, and reflect in an unhurried quietude.

¹³⁹ The online version of the demographic information form may be accessed at [this link](#) and a copy of the same is also offered as Appendix G.

Data Analysis

While the following chapter is focused on what was revealed through the data collected, it seems important to note a bit about the process of data analysis here. As a novice researcher, I needed several chances to figure out the best practices for both data gathering and data analysis. Ethnography recognizes the need for ‘in the field’ attention to data as well as the need to leave the field to get perspective on the abundance of collected data. For the first few weeks, I assumed that I would be the person to transcribe the voice recordings in order to code them for trends and fresh understandings that were not apparent in the midst of interviews. Soon I realized that if I were to type up every interaction and then look through each data set for trends which may not be apparent on the early analysis, I may never finish! That was when I decided that the use of a transcription app would be helpful. I still needed to listen to and proof each interview transcription, but it was a great deal faster than typing every word myself. I also realized that I could listen for trends while reviewing the audio file alongside the transcription. While still a great deal of information, this adjustment made the data management much less daunting.

Data can be read literally, interpretively, and reflexively in ethnography.¹⁴⁰ In this project, all three came into dialogue together. I found it helpful to continue to return to my research question and determine several ways to bucket the data that emanated from it.¹⁴¹ That helped me decide how to code the data that I was seeing transcribed, quoted,

¹⁴⁰ Moschella, 172.

¹⁴¹ Moschella, 170.

and interpreted through my own lens.¹⁴² The Code Book that emerged had the following buckets:

- Ritual
- Listening and Dialogue
- Connection
- Impact
- Thesis/Research Question Relevance

As the research period concluded, I marveled at the information and my own reflections on almost sixty interactions with families from the collected data. While I was grateful for it all, the distant warnings from ethnographers in textbooks about personal investment and subjectivity hit home to me. What to do with all these words and their inferences and meanings? Did I dare to think that there may be some value in the Wondering Together Project and how was I supposed to figure that out? And, most importantly, all this ‘treasure’ emanated from families I had come to appreciate and for whom I now cared. As I now knew from my own experience, the ethnographer can be temporarily embedded in the milieu even if the research is happening via Zoom.

¹⁴² The final version of the Code Book can be seen in further detail as Appendix H.

Chapter 4:
The Wondering Together Project: Analysis
Actual Families + A “Simple” Daily Practice = Data and Discovery

The “Mr. Beast” Family^{143, 144}
Two Exchanges from Their Final Interview
February 19, 2021, Duration of Interview: 15 min., 05 sec.^{145, 146}

- Son:** I want a recommitment.
Me: A recommitment? Tell me tell me what, exactly what you want. So, I want to hear about it from you.
Son: Another month of wonder.
Dad: That’s a lot of wondering.
Me: That is a lot of wondering but it sounds like ...
Son: Wondering is hilarious
Me: I love that. It’s hilarious. It’s so fun that you like it so much. Another month of wondering – that’s between you and your parents. I can certainly coach from the side, but I’m so happy to hear that. And thanks for recommitting this past week and I love that thumbs up. So, if you were to imagine a month ago, when we started. [Mom], you had a different job then, you’ve gotten a new job since then. Things have changed.

[Mom and Dad take the opportunity to share the details of both of their new roles and Son shares what he has been doing over school vacation week while home. This includes recent updates to his bedroom, now a “tween” room. At Son’s urging, they decide that they will continue wondering for an additional month together. More conversation about their wondering practice ensues. Toward the end of our time together, I ask if having this

¹⁴³ “Family Portraits,” a compendium of anonymized biographies to help get a better sense of each family, may be found as Appendix I.

¹⁴⁴ At this final interview, the Mr. Beast Family shares their thoughts on the Wondering Together experience and its impact. It is important to note that they participated during the COVID pandemic, all worked or learned from home, and both Mom (43 years) and Dad (49 years) had job changes during the month that they described as positive. Their only child, a son, is 10 years old. The Mr. Beast Family is the sole family to choose a name other than a color as their code name for the WTP.

¹⁴⁵ Timestamps are offered wherever possible to cite precisely within each transcript where that particular segment of the conversation began. This portion of the interview began at 1 min., 29 sec.

¹⁴⁶ Quotations taken from this interview transcript and each transcript quoted ahead are punctuated to best capture the tenor of the conversation as I understood it at the time. I have made every effort to leave dialogue intact, the way I heard it.

as a daily practice has made it easier to talk as a family about bigger things, like the recent changes in work for Mom and Dad.]

Mom: I would say, I don't know, because it's hard because we are open with each other. We do eventually tell each other things but, um, I guess things get resolved faster because we're having this daily touch base. And this was a big month because on a normal month, we just might have the time to naturally connect with each other but in a month where so much change is happening so quickly, you know, there was a lot of times we barely even had five minutes to talk to each other before we went to bed. So, this forced us to do that and this one [pointing to Son] really took to it and made sure we did it even if the rest of us were, like, just 'let's go to bed.'

Me: Yeah

Mom: He's like, it's "Wonder Time!"

Son: I made us do like 5 extra rounds of wonder. They're, like, 'wonder?' and I will force you!

All: [Laughter]

Me: That is much appreciated. You are a perfect research assistant. Thank you very much.

Dad: There were a couple of nights where I was wondering why he was doing that.

Son: One, because I like wondering. And two, because I like torturing you.

Dad: Well, there you go.¹⁴⁷

*If a family adopts a habit of communal examen,
will the practice enhance their existential and spiritual lexicon?*

This chapter interprets the data from a mixed-method, ethnographically inspired research project that investigated what happens when twelve families from across the United States agreed to participate in a month-long research experience called the Wondering Together Project (WTP) in early 2021 during the COVID pandemic. The WTP birthed so much rich conversation and complex data that I am challenged to do it all justice in this analysis. In fact, I am sure that I cannot. But, as a practical theologian, I am called to try; trusting that God will manifest God's self uniquely and profusely in the spaces that were intentionally created with care and time.

¹⁴⁷ Mr. Beast Family Final Zoom Interview, February 19, 2021, 10 min., 34 sec.

After ‘meeting’ the Mr. Beast Family in the opening narrative, this chapter continues with an introduction to the reporting framework that I chose to help organize the data followed by a pertinent review of the arc of the research period and what unfolded week by week. From there, I will examine my findings in response to the original thesis question. I hope to illustrate how these families and this researcher found compelling evidence that a daily examen enhances both an individual participant’s and their family’s sense of connection. Even so, there were few glimpses at existential or spiritual references. While that conclusion is significant, it becomes, almost, anecdotal in light of other associated findings. The three most compelling of these findings will then be explored. In the first of the three, I will make the case that this brief, daily practice served to satisfy a hunger for dependable ritual in the home for family members of all ages and made space for “the blessing of being listened to.”¹⁴⁸ The second significant finding demonstrated that the WTP offered pathways to connect or reconnect in ways that were understood as vital and transformative, even though some families deemed the act of reconnecting a challenge. The third of the significant findings unpacks how the wondering questions themselves served as a simultaneously solid and flexible framework with which to embark on this daily family ritual, allowing for a sense of deepening and widening of the wondering over time and with practice.

In this chapter, each of the twelve families who participated in the Wondering Together Project will take turns at ‘having the floor’ as a way to bring their family and the data to life in the context of their unique and shared experiences. Through excerpted

¹⁴⁸ Margaret Arnold. “All the Way Down.” (Sermon, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Cohasset, MA, <https://ststephenscohasset.org/Sermons>, February 28, 2021).

dialogue and references from my field notes, I will fashion a ‘narrative collage’ of sorts that offers a glimpse into what was shared with me and with one another as families moved through their four weeks of wondering. Analyzed separately and woven together into what is generalizable, their experiences and wisdom have much to teach us.

Unquestionably, I am also a variable amid this research. While I come to this with the aspiration of neutrality, that is patently unrealistic. I cultivated differing relationships with each family. Some families I knew in advance of the research and others I only knew through scheduled Zoom meetings and emails. For reasons of transparency, reciprocity, and recursivity, I seek to be forthright to the extent that I am aware in reporting my impact on the data, its analysis, and interpretation when appropriate. As a start, I address my relationship with each family in the Family Portraits Appendix.¹⁴⁹

Finding a Reporting Framework

The Mr. Beast Family’s musings on their experience of the Wondering Together Project offer an initial glimpse into what I observed throughout the project; personal anecdotes, families at play, real life events unfolding, self-revelation, differing opinions, and a great deal of humor. But what does one novice, qualitative researcher do to make meaning of twelve families who provided fifty-six discreet interviews for a combined 948 points of coded data? How do I best tell the story of what I heard, what the data revealed, and what I believe it meant? I needed a reporting framework that would honor these families and this data.

¹⁴⁹ Appendix I.

None of the grounding theories referenced in Chapter 2 seemed to do justice as a framework to share the findings before me. At first, I played with the idea of organizing the data around the actual wondering questions: What did I discover that I liked the best? What was the most important? and so on. That framework felt inauthentic and a bit too trite for reporting because what I was discovering in the data felt meaningful and more complex than the wondering-questions-as-framework would allow. I considered the examen as a framework. Where were the places of consolation and desolation in the data? As will become apparent, I sensed God's presence in the research but naming feelings that approached consolation and desolation were not at the heart of the conversations or email exchanges I had with families and, therefore, not an apt framework. And yet, this research was an act of practical theology, and I was hoping to mark those places where I felt there was evidence of shalom for the world. How about the Bible? Perhaps there was a scriptural reference that would provide some sort of architecture for the complexity that ensued when a 'simple' daily practice was inserted into the rhythm of twelve families during a pandemic? Might the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, of the Sower, or of the Leaven parallel the distillation, the surprise, and the generativity that was unfolding in my initial analysis of the data? Nope. Those biblical references and several others I considered all felt mismatched and disrespectful to both the scriptures and these families. Everything felt like a round peg in a square hole and was not serving the story or the data I sensed was at work. No one told me that a Rosetta's Stone was required in unpacking research data, but I had discovered that there was no way to move forward without one.

At this point in ethnographic research, M.D. LeCompte tells her students to draw a picture of what their data say and how the story will be told.¹⁵⁰ I am no artist but having no better ideas and with the clock ticking, I turned over a used piece of printer paper and picked up the pencil on my desk. I read the Prayer of Abandonment and gave it a go. First, an arc like firmament showed up and I wrote *Holy Spirit* and *Shalom for the World*. Then I drew each family as a little embryo of circles; one for the number of people in the family with their chosen code name beside them. Not wanting to sideline any family, I drew in the Beige family who expressed interest, filled out the on-line questionnaire, but never began the WTP. They deserved a place there. Then I drew a church with a lot of little circles to represent St. Stephen's, the church that had chosen the project as a way to offer a shared Lenten practice to its congregation during the pandemic. Feeling a deep appreciation and love for each of the 'twelve,' I drew a heart around each. Then around one family I drew a picture frame to try it on for size. The idea of ethnographic research as being akin to portraiture had been gifted to me in a book that I had read recently called *Little Theologians*.¹⁵¹ Drawing a frame felt like I was conferring a distinct aura that each family deserved, something to honor their unique beauty and my admiration for their willingness to try this experiment with me.

The little pencil drawing ballooned from there and images seemed to show up; for example - the now familiar shape of the corona virus, me as a stick figure with little hearts of appreciation radiating towards the families, a dog and a cat showed up in the

¹⁵⁰ Galman, 101.

¹⁵¹ David M. Csinos, *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 10-11.

drawing as pets were often part of our conversations. Then certain artifacts presented themselves; a kitchen table, a car, a candle alight, a wondering stone like the ones I sent to each family, a cell phone with an 'x' through it, a calendar depicting a month, a computer monitor with the word Zoom in the middle, my cell phone-as-voice recorder. Then my drawing skills gave out, so I began to add participant adjectives that bubbled up around the paper's edges; *foster children, recent retiree, 82 years old, 1-year old twins, only child, newly married, early career, mid-career, new jobs, working from home, working outside the home, adult children, teens, tweens...* Then the spaces inside began to fill up with key phrases; *I wonder, Consolation, Desolation, Listening and Dialogue, Ritual, Connection, Impact, Thick Description, Thesis Question, Being Listened To, Agency, They Can Handle My Stuff, and Coercion* (I drew an "X" through that last term.)

Per LeCompte, I had drawn a picture of the data, but I still did not have a clue how to tell its story. "It needs a different base," I thought. It was too flat. I put it aside in frustration which was turning to despair. Every ethnography text I had read counsels you that it takes time to find your way forward. All these things - these threads, these images, these pieces of data - needed time to coalesce. Good advice but hard to swallow when there are due dates involved.

Call it process, call it serendipity, call it God at work, but there was a miracle at this point when a library book ordered months before became available. Leigh McDonald Hall, a dear friend from high school and now an educator at the same school, had shared with me the work of Harvard psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair who had made an impactful visit to our alma mater to wake parents up to the influence of cell phones in their families. In her book, *The Big Disconnect*, Steiner-Adair broadens her lens in

Chapter 8 with a relevant and accessible image wherein she declares families to be *ecosystems*. As such, the hope is that they are sustainable ones. She describes the attributes of a sustainable family as having “the ability of an ecosystem to hold, endure, or bear the weight of a wide variety of social and natural forces which could compromise its healthy operation.”¹⁵² While she focuses on social media as a challenge to that ecosystem, I was reminded of so many of the terms and images that I had noted on my recent picture that can settle or unsettle a family’s unique ecosystem.¹⁵³ Steiner-Adair continues, “[t]he sustainable family is a family that has created a fabric of connectivity that is strong and many layered. It is flexible, not brittle, and has high tensile strength forged by spending time together.”¹⁵⁴ Voila! That is what I had witnessed; families’ tensile strength was forged or depleted by the ways they shared time together. I was convinced that this was the lens through which to share the nuanced findings of the WTP; its successes, its shortcomings, and its suggestions of deeper learnings to be unearthed with further research. The significant findings that are highlighted result from what ensued, uniquely and collectively, when a family’s idiosyncratic woven fabric of connectivity, their ecosystem, was invited and challenged to accommodate a month of wondering together. As the families themselves will share narratively, when there is a shift in one aspect, there are ripples throughout the entire ecosystem.

¹⁵² Catherine Steiner-Adair and Teresa Barker, “Chapter 8: The Sustainable Family - Turning Tech into an Ally for Closeness, Creativity, and Community,” in *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age* (New York, NY: Harper, 2014), pp. 260-295, 261.

¹⁵³ Steiner-Adair 261-2.

¹⁵⁴ Steiner-Adair, 262.

The Experience of Wondering Together

To understand the research conclusions, it feels important to be grounded in the experience of those families who participated in the Wondering Together Project. What was the WTP like for them week by week? In Chapter 3, I detailed how recruitment and enrollment unfolded in the span of one month.¹⁵⁵ Here, I offer an overview of the research experience itself that began on January 14, 2021, for the White Family and ended on April 7, 2021, for the Lime Green Family.

The Initial Interview:

The Initial Interview signaled the beginning of the formal research experience. All but one of these first meetings was held on Zoom which was an excellent format to be able to ‘see’ one another and begin to develop new relationships or extend existing ones during the pandemic. Not all the initial interviews happened in the same week; there was a rollout of sorts as families enrolled and their first interview was scheduled. Those dates are noted in each family’s portrait.¹⁵⁶ The duration of Initial Interviews ranged from 6 min., 00 sec. (Cobalt Family) to 23 min. 14 sec. (Light Blue Family.) My focus was to build rapport, cultivate a sense of trustworthiness, peek at the family ecosystem, and to

¹⁵⁵ The first demographic questionnaire was completed online on January 10, 2021, by the Teal Family and the last was completed on February 10, 2021 by the Cyan Family.

¹⁵⁶ Appendix I.

invite them gently to engage in the practice. Unlike the four subsequent interviews, I spoke more than I listened as I was training the family members in the actual WTP practice. On my computer screen, I viewed the family on Zoom, but I could also see the rubric I had developed on the excel tab of the research spreadsheet entitled *Initial Interview Outline*.¹⁵⁷ I used those notes to cue me on all the points I wanted to convey as uniformly as possible across the family cohort. Not every conversation followed the same order, but I worked to make sure that I touched on all points by the end of our time together. Following the transcription and coding of the Cyan's first interview, I realized that I had explained that protecting their privacy was important as they chose their color code name, but I failed to detail my exact policy on how I did that (data saved on hard drive for 10 years, etc.) as I had for the other families. I made a note to review this at the following week's Zoom meeting, but this was the sole family that did not continue the research after the first week.

The Initial Interview was my first real-time interaction with each family in the research setting. To varying degrees, I was able to sense where the family was expressing implicit solidarity and where the edges were fraying as we were all nine or more months into the sheltered experience of the pandemic. The 'warp and weft' of each family's unique fabric began to reveal itself in these meetings and I found each to be remarkable in their own way. When there was a hint of resonance or I sensed a place where an established family habit may link with the new wondering practice, I tried to underscore those connections. For example, I acknowledged the connection made when Mr.

¹⁵⁷ The rubrics I used for each of the five interviews are available as Appendix J. Weeks 1,2, and 3 are offered in their email versions but are the same for Zoom interviews of those same weeks.

Turquoise observed, “We go to a church that teaches mindfulness... This reminds me strongly of that.”¹⁵⁸ The Teal Family has an established time after dinner to unwind together. “Yeah, I think between 7:30-8 [p.m.], that’s our down time. That’ll probably be our best time to do it [the WTP].”¹⁵⁹ I cheered that plan on as they were linking this new habit with an established practice. Interestingly, despite this family’s routine quiet time after dinner, by their third week the Teals found that doing the practice as they drove to school in the morning better matched their family’s rhythm.

Week #1:

I refer to the first interview a week after beginning the practice as Week #1. These meetings generally seemed to focus on the specifics of the practice and how things were going. Data coding pointed towards evidence of emerging connections and insights in addition to observations about the practice itself. Some families chose to participate in the Week #1 interview by email as was their choice (Green, Lime Green, Mr. Beast, Pink, and Yellow) and others by Zoom (Cobalt, Light Blue, Rose Gold, Teal, Turquoise, and White.)¹⁶⁰ The quantitative data from this first week of doing the practice revealed that the exchanges with me were focused on the practicalities of adopting a new ritual practice

¹⁵⁸ Turquoise Family Initial Zoom Interview on January 25, 2021, at 10 min., 30 sec.

¹⁵⁹ Mom Teal speaking, Teal Family Initial Zoom Interview on January 18, 2021, at 15 min., 42 sec.

¹⁶⁰ Going forward, I omit the Cyan family from data analysis as they were no longer participatory. They were the only family who participated in the Initial Interview and did not complete the research period.

as evidenced in the graph's pink line, signifying topics focusing on "Ritual."¹⁶¹ Also notable is the increasing trend in topics around "Connection" (navy line) and "Impact" (purple line.) This suggests that there was early recognition and some budding awareness of how the WTP was impacting the life of their family even after one week of the practice.

Some families embraced the ritual and followed the 'rules.' The Rose Gold Family, a young couple, started their wondering time each evening by holding hands with their dog to prepare. "[Our dog] holds hands with us as we take our deep breath."¹⁶² When I asked if they had made any accommodations or changes to the practice to "make it their own," Mrs. Rose Gold said that she generally was "a rule follower. So, the idea of breaking the system you gave us truly did not occur to me."¹⁶³ Conversely, Mr. Cobalt found Question #4 (*I wonder what part of today you would have liked to leave out?*) to be a challenge to end the practice. "I'm the kind of person who gets depressed and a depressing question will put me out of, you know, off."¹⁶⁴ This couple chose to reorder the questions during their first week of practice so that the fourth question, deemed depressing by Mr. Cobalt, could follow Question #1 (*I wonder what part of today you liked the best?*) and precede Questions #2 and #3 (*I wonder what part of the day was most important? And I wonder when you felt most alive today?*) For the Cobalts, Question #3 was a more preferable place to end their practice.

¹⁶¹ See Appendix K, "Connection, Impact, and Ritual Code Totals by Week."

¹⁶² Mrs. Rose Gold, Rose Gold Week #1 Zoom Interview on January 28, 2021, at 7 min., 23 sec.

¹⁶³ Mrs. Rose Gold, Week #1 Zoom Interview on January 28, 2021, at 7 min., 53 sec.

¹⁶⁴ Mr. Cobalt, Week #1 Zoom Interview on January 24, 2021, at 3 min., 49 sec.

Week #2:

Week #2 served as a temporal and ideological flex point. It marked the midpoint in the research period, and I sensed that families were feeling competent with the practice as I was consistently hearing references to its value for both families with and without children at home. Mr. White described a sense of an emerging “cadence” in their nightly wondering ritual while Mrs. White observed, “... for me it [the practice] feels like, I don’t know, habitual. Like, it doesn’t feel like an add-on right now ... it’s part of our routine.”¹⁶⁵ In response to one of my Week #2 email questions “Type a few adjectives or phrases to describe how wondering together feels in your family,” Mrs. Pink responded, “ – calming, centering, meaningful, insightful.”¹⁶⁶ Interesting to see the coherence between the White Family, a young married couple with no children, and the Pink Family who are several years older with a five-year-old daughter at home.

Week #2 was also the week that most families were offered the addition of the optional fifth question (“*I wonder how you are feeling in this moment?*”) while two families who had suggested an interest in changing or expanding the original four questions were offered Question #5 at Week #1.¹⁶⁷ The invitation to consider adding the question to the original four wondering questions was consistent across families. I will

¹⁶⁵ Mr. White, White Family Week #2 Zoom Interview on January 28, 2021, at 1 min., 38 sec. & 3 min., 22 sec.

¹⁶⁶ Mrs. Pink responding for Pink Family Week #2 by email, January 30, 2021.

¹⁶⁷ The Cobalt and Light Blue Families were offered the 5th Question at the Week #1 interview based on our discussion that week and my sense they would be interested in the 5th Question as part of their practice at that juncture.

address the impact of the fifth question later in this chapter, but I note here that each family expressed either an invested curiosity in the additional question or an outright positive response.¹⁶⁸

For the most part, the Week #2 check-in represented ‘smooth sailing’ for families. 82% of families expressed a sense of ownership of the practice, the outliers being the Pink and Green Families whose email exchanges that week indicated no specific concerns, but I did not perceive a sense of ‘ownership’ *per se* for either family.¹⁶⁹ Week #2 also evidenced longer conversations with me for those who preferred Zoom check-ins when compared with Week #1. This was true for all but the Teal Family. In reviewing the transcripts, there was evidence that families were interested in talking in more detail about their wondering practice and how it was impacting family life. Mom Light Blue captures this sense in their Week #2 interview.

And so just really, it's making an impact and it's a really cool, cool thing and there are times that, you know, I love having the stone because we have it on the table. And as soon as we start shutting down for the night and we're going, we have to wonder, we haven't wondered yet and so then you know it becomes just part of the routine. And again, we interrupted [Dad Light Blue] during class because we're like, ah, you know that we didn't wonder in time before he went to class... [5-year-old Son Light Blue] just he just really, really enjoys it and he, also, I mean, you know, [Dad Light Blue] helped him read and a couple nights. [Son Light Blue] read them the best of his ability, the questions and he knows, you know, and we all agree with the Question 5. Like, how you feel, are you know, I wonder how this makes you feel? And everybody's like, ‘this really it feels good.’ It feels good to talk. It feels good to just oh, yeah. This is what I think was most important and you know, it goes from there.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ These responses were coded as R-10 (discussion) or R-11 (positive response) to the fifth question. See Appendix L “Codes Related to 5th Question by Week.”

¹⁶⁹ A family’s evidence of a *Sense of Ownership of the Ritual/Practice* was coded as R-6. See Appendix M “R-6 Week #2 Ownership of Practice by Family.”

¹⁷⁰ Mom Light Blue, Week #2 Zoom Interview, February 12, 2021, 9 min., 33 sec.

Week #3:

If Week #2 served as the flex point, Week #3 seemed more like the swamp. Check-ins, whether by Zoom or email, suggested that things felt like they were “falling off the rails” in the practice for about half of the families.¹⁷¹ The quantitative data reflects this shift as connection codes decreased in Week #3 and increased the following week.¹⁷² Mr. White described a ‘muddle’ and wondered if there was a “Week #3 pattern” for other participating families.¹⁷³ The Teals had an illness in the family and Mr. Rose Gold was on a weeklong at-home staycation that challenged that family’s normal rhythm. The Whites had fewer scheduled evening meals together and Mom Yellow took the children to visit family. Mom Lime Green described a waning enthusiasm in her children for wondering together. There was so much flux that I wondered if this was synchronicity or an unforeseen pattern in ritual acquisition. I was reminded of Tuckman’s Four Stages of Group Development which I first learned of in nursing school in the early 1980’s.¹⁷⁴ Psychologist Bruce Tuckman suggested that groups form in a predictable dynamic which requires awareness and planning. While not every group did so, most followed these four phases:

1. Forming
2. Storming
3. Norming
4. Performing (and a later 5th step was Adjourning.)¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Mrs. Rose Gold Week #3 Email Exchange, February 12, 2021.

¹⁷² “Connection & Disconnection Code Totals by Family and Week,” Appendix N.

¹⁷³ White Week #3 Zoom Interview, February 4, 2021, 4min., 26 sec.

¹⁷⁴ Bruce W. Tuckman, “Developmental Sequence in Small Groups.,” *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal* (Reprint of original in *Psychological Bulletin*, 1965 Vol 63:6), 3 (2001): pp. 66-81, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0022100>.

¹⁷⁵ Tuckman, 66.

Perhaps this was a *storming* pattern in Week #3 with its characteristic sense of unrest.¹⁷⁶ If so, Tuckman would counsel that this is the phase where trust in both the process and one another is tested and built. In the Tuckman model, hostility reflects “a means of expressing individuality” and results in greater intimacy and the opportunity for meaningful work together going forward.¹⁷⁷ In retrospect, this may explain the dynamic. With Week #2 descriptors being ‘cadence’ and ‘habit,’ it seems fitting that this satisfaction with normalizing the practice would give way to challenges. The honeymoon was over.

There was a certain formula to what I was hearing at Week #3 from the families that were experiencing these bumps. First, there was an acknowledgement that the practice had gone off kilter. That was followed by a sincere hope that their family would work through it. Then, there was a closing sense of optimism. This pattern was exhibited in the Week #3 emails of the Lime Green, Rose Gold, and Yellow families and in the Zoom interview of the Whites and Teals. The Mr. Beasts had a more challenging Week #2 and may have had a more characteristic Week #3 in their chronological Week #2. Mom Beast wrote about a shift by Week #3, noting “[l]ast week was easier to wonder [than Week #2].”¹⁷⁸ The Light Blues, Greens, Pinks, and Cobalts did not seem to exhibit

¹⁷⁶ Tuckman, 76.

¹⁷⁷ Tuckman, 69.

¹⁷⁸ Mr. Beast Family, Week #3 email exchange, February 14, 2021.

this pattern which reflects Tuckman's observation that the 'Storming' phase is not a requisite experience to moving into the 'Norming' of a group's work together.¹⁷⁹

Maybe the Tuckman model was part of the explanation, but I do not believe that was the whole story. My intuition in reflecting on the Week #3 shift was that wondering together was beginning to deepen emotionally. Family members had developed a sense of trust in the practice and in the safety of what could be shared so they began to venture into bigger feelings that may have felt riskier. For example, Mom Mr. Beast shared that things had been really hard for their son that week. "[Son Mr. Beast] had a breakthrough mid-week, telling us about something that had been bothering him at school and causing a lot of moodiness for a few days."¹⁸⁰ This example illustrates my sense that there were more risks being taken in the sharing of big feelings that came with an evolving trust in the practice; further evidence that the tensile strength of the families in the WTP would continue to be enhanced over time and with practice.

It is hard to assess whether the addition of the fifth question in Week #2 added to some of the bumpiness reported at Week #3. Even though the extra question was universally welcomed by families, did it throw a wrench in the works? In the end, I do not think so. When I review my field notes, the only worry I expressed was a feeling of "subtle desperation" the day I received Mom Lime Green's email indicating waning enthusiasm.¹⁸¹ For the most part, I sensed that people reacted positively to my invitation

¹⁷⁹ Tuckman, 71.

¹⁸⁰ Mr. Beast Family Week #3 email exchange, February 14, 2021.

¹⁸¹ Field notes on 3.14.21.

for the fifth question and were invested in sticking with the WTP because they valued the new opportunity for connection with themselves and one another.

Closing Interview:

All eleven remaining families participated in a closing interview via Zoom (except the Lime Greens who did so by phone), lasting from 7 min., 52 sec. for the Yellow Family to 28 min., 21 sec. for the Cobalt Family. As in the other weeks, I used an outline for these interviews to ensure uniformity. I would begin by checking in on how the practice had gone for the past week and then offer three overarching questions that invited reflection on the totality of each family's experience over the research period. As I noted in the section on Week #3, by this closing conversation, the 'muddle' of the penultimate week had progressed to a sense of ownership in the final week.

The first of the three summary questions was, "I wonder what you have learned about yourself and about your family during the Wondering Together Project?"

Naturally, there were a variety of responses and the Lime Green's responses reflect that diversity:

9-year-old Son Lime Green observed, "We all have different answers that... we all don't have the best day ever... some of us can have, like, some of us, sometimes not a good day, sometimes we have a really good day in there. I can have, like, a really good day." To which his older sister added, "Um, well, it's, I learned that it's nice to kind of let go of what you did today. And kind of having a fresh, new start the next day because, like, if you have bad day like yesterday and you didn't ask, like, what was your worst day or what would you like to leave out? You're kind of still have that worst moment with you but kind of let go, it's kind of like a soothing thing for me." Mom Lime Green shared that one of the take-away's from the WTP was that she realized that she was moving through her days with more intention.¹⁸²

¹⁸² Lime Green Final Interview by telephone, April 7, 2021, at 6 min., 53 sec.

While the WTP was coded for its ‘Impact’ with 14 subcodes, a narrower focus on the personal, marital, and familial impact is important to note as we consider the Closing Interview. The data on how participants evaluated the impact of the practice are compelling and echo what I heard about significance and importance of the WTP during these closing interviews. The increase for each of these three codes at the final interview (Week #4) is fitting given the nature of the evaluative questions at the closing interview. The code for Personal Impact (I-6), Marital Impact (I-7), and Familial Impact (I-8) are synthesized in Appendix O.¹⁸³ I think it is worthwhile to note here that for this family-centered practice, its greatest influence was on *personal impact* as indicated by the code I-6 in the final interview. This suggests that the wondering together experience was also understood as a formative and valuable exercise in personal growth, individual agency, and self-awareness as the research period concluded even though it was offered as a practice for family benefit.

With the second summary question of the final interview, I asked participants if they thought they would continue wondering together in some form going forward. 100% of families agreed that they would be or hoped to continue. The Green Family had a similar but shorter daily ritual prior to the WTP and they were looking forward to returning to fewer questions while Ms. Rose Gold was looking forward to its benefits once they had children in the house. Both she and Mr. Rose Gold recognized that he had less investment in the practice than she did. Interestingly, while Mr. Rose Gold noted ingraining new habits was challenging for him, he looked forward to using the practice

¹⁸³ Appendix O, “Impact Code Totals by Week.”

when visiting with friends as a thoughtful way to reconnect.¹⁸⁴ This expansion of the family circle was also underscored by Mom Lime Green who shared that her parents and brother had come to dinner near the close of their wondering experience. It was the first time they had shared a meal since the beginning of the pandemic, and all gathered at their table wondered together. “The thing that I liked, probably 2 weeks ago, we had dinner with my parents and my brother was visiting from [city in California] and then we all did the wondering questions together since we were at our house and I thought I was kind of fun to be able to do it with like new people.”¹⁸⁵ These expressions of generativity emanating from the practice are examples of building another layer into the sustainable family ecosystem.

Mom Yellow sent an unsolicited email the day after our closing interview on Zoom which captures the impact she was feeling.

Hi Sally!

Following up from our conversation yesterday, I hope [Dad Yellow] and I continue to touch base every day. I was listening to a podcast on my way in today and the host was talking about how people from the UK are generally great storytellers. I love that. I hope to have that with the babies and to have their grandparents join in on the family storytelling.

I really think this practice has opened up my eyes to the importance of sitting down as a family and talking. I love the opened communication [Dad Yellow] and I have been focusing on and adding how we are feeling has also added to my understanding. After almost 18 years together I thought I also knew how he was feeling but that isn't the case!

Thanks again for including us on this journey!¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Rose Gold Final 2.18.21 12 min., 36 sec.

¹⁸⁵ Lime Green Final Interview by telephone, April 7, 2021, at 5 min, 7 sec.

¹⁸⁶ Email from Mom Yellow on February 22, 2021.

The final question offered families a chance to share their thoughts on whether the WTP served the thesis question. That will be the first finding addressed in the next section.

Research Findings
The Thesis Question and Three Additional Significant Findings

Findings on The Thesis Question:

Responding to the vernacular expression of the thesis question, families all agreed that the Wondering Together Project would likely be beneficial when a family encountered “big things.” However, the short research period yielded no overt realizations of an enhanced existential or spiritual lexicon *per se*.

*If a family adopts a habit of communal examen,
will the practice enhance their existential and spiritual lexicon?*

Restated in the vernacular,

*If a family checks in daily when things are ‘normal,’
will that make it easier to talk about the ‘big things’ when they happen?*

As noted in my reflections on the final interview, the last question I asked each family was whether they thought the thesis question (offered in the vernacular form above) rang true after participating in the WTP. As the quantitative data show, there was an overwhelmingly positive response for both families with children and without children living at home.¹⁸⁷ There was no indication from any participant that wondering together

¹⁸⁷ See Appendix P, “Thesis Question Responses by Family Group.” Appendix H, the Code Book, serves as a reference for code abbreviations.

might negatively impact a family in this regard.¹⁸⁸ However, of all the dialogue that occurred during those final interviews, answering this question seemed to kindle the least energy within the discussion. How ironic since it was the answer I had been most interested in hearing! After reviewing the transcripts and my field notes, here is what I concluded:

- It is hard, if not impossible, to reflect on a question of impact when you are so close to the process and still ‘in it.’ Perhaps the most uncomplicated example of this was experiencing the WTP during the pandemic. Even though every family shared the variable of the stress of COVID, no one connected it as a ‘big thing’ when they responded to my interview questions about the vernacular version of the thesis question.¹⁸⁹
- Some families were clear that they entered the WTP already well-equipped to talk about ‘big things.’ It was the value of the daily connection that was where they felt most nourished by wondering together.
- Families were invested in the sustainability of their family ecosystem rather than anticipating or preparing for how that ecosystem would respond to future instability. What had drawn the families toward

¹⁸⁸ The data show one “Q-2” negative response to the thesis question. This was a miscode on my part but once the data was in the hands of Statistician Niesa Ryder, I did not feel it was ethical to recode that data. Here is the miscoded quotation from Mom Lime Green during their final interview: (Q-2) “Any exercise to improve our capacity in that area and also you know diminish our inclinations to sweep things under the rug, I think that anything that helps in those areas are helpful.” The code Q-1 ought to have been assigned.

¹⁸⁹ The COVID pandemic came up often in discussion but not in response to this particular question. See Appendix Q, “Occurrence of COVID Codes by Family” and Appendix R, “Families with COVID Codes by Week.”

participating in the WTP was not the promise of an enhanced spiritual or existential lexicon, it was the possibility of re-establishing or deepening family relationships through a daily, home-based ritual.

While families offered a positive response to my final interview question as is evident in the data, I observed in my field notes several times that I felt like the participants reacted as if the question was coming out of ‘left field.’ I did not sense disagreement or provocation in their responses but, rather, a sense of ‘that’s not what this is about.’ A direct answer followed by some heartfelt musings on what felt valuable at this point of research closure was the general response. For example, Mom Light Blue responded directly to the question:

For me, personally, it [the vernacular version of the thesis question] feels true.¹⁹⁰ If we stay open, do like, the best part of my day is video games even if I don’t see that, it allows for, you know, the communication to be there. It helps to talk about the harder things, and they’re gonna come. You know, so, that’s how I feel.¹⁹¹

Interestingly, Dad Light Blue continued on the heels of Mom’s feedback with a bend toward what I sensed was a vital tenet for him; deep listening and honoring his two other family members’ honest feelings and opinions. The focus had shifted from my thesis-based question back to takeaways that felt valuable to him:

Training ourselves not to step on what each other are feeling in the moment or feeling about what we’ve been going through and not say, you know, like ‘well you shouldn’t be doing that, you should feel this way about...’ will display about recognizing each other’s honest feelings about things, acknowledging that, and

¹⁹⁰ “If a family checks in daily when things are ‘normal,’ will that make it easier to talk about the ‘big things’ when they happen?”

¹⁹¹ Mom Light Blue at Light Blue Final Interview on February 28, 2021, at 12 min., 34 sec.

being comfortable talking about how we feel even if it's completely the opposite about how one of the ... other members of the family feels. Still being comfortable, being open about that. I think it's definitely moved us in that direction.¹⁹²

The Light Blues' reactions were characteristic of others in response to the thesis question; a direct address of the question followed by connection to insight about the greater experience. As I considered what was unfolding, the Light Blues were recognizing that their family ecosystem had changed for the better and their responses in our final interview served to let them distill their takeaways in one another's presence.

The Green, Lime Green, and Mr. Beast families were the three families who expressed a certainty that they came into the WTP with the skills already in place to talk about 'big things.' Mom Lime Green responded to my final question of the interview by noting that her family, "[does] a pretty good job of discussing stuff that's hard."¹⁹³ After I clarified by asking, "So, it couldn't hurt [your family's capacity to wrestle with bigger challenges] but probably wasn't something you needed in the first place," Mom Lime Green observed, "I think every family could use that to some degree. None of us do it perfectly...any exercise to improve our capacity in that area and, also, diminish our inclinations to sweep things under the rug, I think that anything that helps in those areas is helpful."¹⁹⁴

For the Green Family, both teenaged daughters expressed a clear sense that they have a family dynamic in which they already felt capable of talking about 'bigger things.'

¹⁹² Dad Light Blue at Light Blue Final Interview on February 28, 2021, at 12 min., 50 sec.

¹⁹³ Mom Lime Green in Final Interview by telephone, April 7, 2021, 15 min., 04 sec.

¹⁹⁴ Mom Lime Green in Final Interview by telephone, April 7, 2021, at 16 min., 02 sec.

18-year-old Elder Daughter Green responded, “I don’t know if we’re a great family to answer that question because I don’t remember a time that we ever didn’t talk to each other.”¹⁹⁵ The more reticent 14-year-old Younger Green Daughter followed with, “I mean, I guess, I talk to many teenagers throughout my years because, I mean, I’ve been friends with a lot of different people, different types of people, but it makes me feel very grateful that I have a family that is very, they’re always there.”¹⁹⁶

I am aware of two families who experienced ‘big things’ during their research experience in addition to the shared experience of the pandemic for all involved. For one family, it was a significant change in jobs for both parents and for another it was a serious case of COVID-19. The Mr. Beast Family saw the sale of one business by Dad Mr. Beast in order that he might focus his energy on another business about which he felt much more passionate. During the same month, Mom Mr. Beast saw an impactful expansion in her role at work. The Turquoise Family experienced Ms. Turquoise’s COVID hospitalization for 10 days and subsequent convalescence. Neither of these families indicated directly or indirectly that their wondering together experience had aided their ability to cope with these significant events. Yet, both families were faithful to the ritual during and after these experiences and were able to express a sense of appreciation for the practice. Mr. Turquoise responded to the final interview’s ‘thesis question’ thusly: “I’ve noticed that in some of our sessions, the simple wondering question would often lead to something deeper if we spent some time talking about [it] afterwards. It’s kind of

¹⁹⁵ Elder Daughter in Green Family Final Zoom Interview on February 14, 2021, at 11 min., 03 sec.

¹⁹⁶ Younger Daughter in Green Family Final Zoom Interview on February 14, 2021, at 13 min., 25 sec.

an invitation to open up in a way.”¹⁹⁷ Even in the wake of something so challenging as his wife’s recent illness, Mr. Turquoise was focused on the generative nature of the wondering practice rather than any specific assistance it offered in coping with the stress of a loved one hospitalized with COVID.

There was not one instance where any term referring to God in response to this question was expressed. In my original proposal for this research, I defined the four common expressions of human existential limits as being aloneness, freedom, purpose/meaning, and death.^{198, 199} While these topics were infrequently referenced at different times during the research period, they were not expressed in any participant’s reply to this final question except in one instance when I offered “a pet dying” as an example of a ‘big thing.’ In response, 12-year-old Daughter Lime Green expressed a sense of appreciation for the wondering practice:

It's nice 'cause everyone has a little piece of advice, like, if, for example, your friend's dog is going to be put down but they're still going through the decision to see if they want to put the dog down, everyone has advice like, ‘well, if the dog is that sick, it should probably be put down.’ Like different advice that is helpful.

To which I responded, “So, it really gives you a place to kind of hear and hold all the advice that might be coming during kind of a really challenging time?”

“Yes,” she said.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Mr. Turquoise in Turquoise Final Zoom Interview on March 22, 2021, at 14 min., 28 sec.

¹⁹⁸ Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1980), 8. I was introduced to Yalom’s four-aspect existential framework through the work of Jerome Berryman. See Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1995), 57.

¹⁹⁹ From my D. Min. research proposal of January 2020: *This in turn will enhance their existential lexicon as they grapple with those things that make us uniquely human: aloneness, freedom, purpose, and death. In doing so, I am convinced we are also inviting these family members into a fresh awareness of the multitude of ways their lives are infused and suffused by something greater than themselves – that which is transcendent and imminent.*

²⁰⁰ Daughter Lime Green in Lime Green Final Interview on April 7, 2021, 12 min., 28 sec.

As to any evidence of an expanded spiritual and existential lexicon, I have been clear that ‘lexicon’ should be interpreted much more broadly than vocabulary. Family stories, shared images, and objects that hold communal resonance are examples of what I have referred to as evidence of the lexicon of a family’s ethos and mythos. These bits of a family’s unique, shared lexicon are difficult to measure using serial interviews and might be better evaluated through self-reporting tools, embedding in a family, or identifying better research instruments that identify this ‘softer’ data outside of verbal references. Undoubtedly, an experienced qualitative researcher could help improve this aspect of the research design.

In summary, the proposition of the thesis question is statistically valid as measured by family response at the conclusion of the research period.²⁰¹ However, the question itself missed the mark regarding how the WTP may strengthen a family and engender broader avenues for sustainability of their family ecosystem. A reconstructed research design would include a provision for thesis question re-assessment at discrete intervals following an extended research period. That way, families would have both increased opportunities to experience challenges and a ‘longer view’ of their family dynamic in light of their exposure to the wondering together ritual, whether they continue the practice or not. Through my lens as a practical theologian with the hope that the WTP might generate space for a broadening of a family’s spiritual awareness, I had posited that some glimpse of the divine might manifest as shared narratives or images of wisdom and

²⁰¹ “An estimate for the true percent of families that would have a positive response is 81.81% with a margin of error of 22.74% (95% Bootstrap Confidence Interval from 59.06% to 100%). Assuming the families in the cohort are representative of most families and can be considered independent from one another, this provides convincing evidence that the practice would elicit a positive response from a majority of families.” (Source: Statistician Niesa Ryder.)

comfort. What I discovered was that those deep truths surfaced in the form of a stronger family ecosystem, not in the ways I expected or had provided for in the research design.

Now, I turn my attention from the thesis question where the research was originally tethered to the three most significant findings the Wondering Together Project revealed.

Significant Finding #1:

The Wondering Together Project’s ritual enhances the tensile strength of a family ecosystem by ensuring trustworthy daily (or almost daily) encounters that feel valuable and vital as evidenced by participants’ (including children’s) hunger for the ritual itself. Having a particular ‘architecture’ (time, space, order) to the wondering ritual imbues it with a sense of comfort, safety, and promise.

Returning to Catherine Steiner-Adair’s definition of a sustainable family ecosystem, I address the first half of Finding #1 above: The Wondering Together Project’s ritual enhances the tensile strength of a family ecosystem by ensuring trustworthy (almost) daily encounters that feel valuable and vital as evidenced by participants’ (including children’s) hunger for the ritual itself. The WTP data compellingly argue for the additive value of a dependable ritual into the daily experience of a family. For this we look at data coded for Ritual (as Valuable, Generative, Sustainable, and Expressing a Sense of Ownership).²⁰² As the graph depicts, there was a strong sense of valuing the practice (R-2) in Weeks #2 and #4 which reflects both the initial adoption of the WTP into the life of the family after one week and again at the Final Interview in Week #4 after the ‘muddle’ of Week #3. The final interview was also

²⁰² See Appendix S, “Ritual (Valuable, Generative, Sustainable, Ownership) and Appendix T, “Ritual Codes Grouped by Week.”

the opportunity for families to take the long view and reflect on the entirety of their four-week experience. The R-4 code indicates that families felt an increasing sense that the practice was generative as the weeks went along, peaking in Week #4 at the time of the final interview. The sense of ownership of the practice (R-6) which peaked in Week #2 is attributable to the families' increased sense of confidence after completing two weeks of the WTP.

If we agree that “[t]he sustainable family is a family that has created a fabric of connectivity that is strong and many layered. It is flexible, not brittle, and has high tensile strength forged by spending time together,” then the WTP is an invitation to investigate the value of the practice’s component parts in order to understand how a family’s ecosystem is enhanced during the time spent together.²⁰³ Early in the WTP, I felt affirmed in the ritual when parents began to share stories of how their children held them accountable if the ‘wondering time’ was missed. I was delighted that the youngest wonderers had the agency to name that it was not alright with them when the ritual changed or wondering was overlooked entirely, even when it was for very understandable reasons. Earlier in this chapter, Mom Light Blue referenced this in her Week #2 Interview but here was what she noticed even earlier, in her original observation during their Week #1 Interview.

... so [Dad Light Blue] has his [on-line] classes on Monday and Wednesday evenings. And I guess both evenings we forgot to do it [wondering together] before he got into class. And I was just getting [5-year-old Son Light Blue] ready for bed and he got so upset that I was like it’ll just be you and me [doing the wondering.] And he goes “no, no, no.” [Dad Light Blue] turned off his camera and ran in and quickly did the wondering, you know real quick.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Steiner-Adair, 262.

²⁰⁴ Mom Light Blue, Week #1 Zoom Interview on February 5, 2021, at 1 min., 29 sec.

In our Week #1 email exchange, Mom Lime Green noted something similar for nine-year old Son Lime Green. “I am always the one to ask the questions so far, but last night [Son Lime Green] actually reminded me to do it, so it seems like the kids are enjoying it.”²⁰⁵ The trend continued as evidenced in Mom Lime Green’s email from the following week. “[Son Lime Green] has started taking turns reading the questions to everyone, which is new. More often it has been the kids to remember to do the questions at dinner time rather than me.”²⁰⁶

The beginning of this chapter opened with an excerpt from the Mr. Beast Family’s final interview. It was clear there that 10-year-old Son Mr. Beast had a significant investment in the family’s continued wondering practice. This was also evident in Week #1 and is another example of the agency of young wonderers. Mom Mr. Beast writes in our email exchange, “The last 2 nights were very hectic but [Son Mr. Beast] was the one to make sure we wondered together. We just brought the [wondering] stone and candle up to the bedroom and did it from bed. So I think on less busy days we will do it from the living room but no matter what we will get it in before bed.”²⁰⁷

As a final example, I offer the Pink Family. They were enthusiastic participants in the WTP, so much so that they began the practice before we first met by using the instructions offered on the WTP’s research website. The energy of 5-year-old Daughter

²⁰⁵ Mom Lime Green at Week #1 Email Exchange on February 12, 2021.

²⁰⁶ Mom Lime Green at Week #2 Email Exchange on February 28, 2021. (NB: Lime Green Family had an extended research period as children divided their time between two homes and only experienced the WTP when in residence with Mom Lime Green.)

²⁰⁷ Mom Mr. Beast at Week #1 Email Exchange on January 29, 2021.

Pink was vibrational at the beginning of our initial interview which Mom attributed to the lack of structure at home during the pandemic. As we began to chat, Mom Pink said, “Sally, I will say that we tried to start it [the Wondering Together Project] on our own and did it for two nights. And on the third night, I said we need to wait for [our meeting with] Sally and [Daughter Pink] said ‘but I love doing this every night.’”²⁰⁸ Towards the end of our initial conversation, Mom Pink reflected, “Yeah, I think ... for families right now, or I’ll speak for us. There is no routine. There is no routine at all. So, I think for her having even done that [the wondering together ritual] a few nights and asking why we weren’t doing it, it becomes something safe that she can rely on if her parents get their act together.”²⁰⁹

These four examples of children’s ownership of the wondering together ritual kindled an attendant and embryonic dual theory which requires further investigation on my part. I introduce it here as it feels relevant. In reviewing the literature on ritual in Chapter 2, I concluded that *a family’s values can be seen in the way they prioritize certain choices (materialism, social justice, volunteerism, anger, victimization, etc.)*²¹⁰ Perhaps what is evidenced in these experiences of the Light Blue, Lime Green, Mr. Beast, and Pink families is that children are not passive recipients of their family’s values. In these examples, children claim an agency in setting priorities and, by extension, the values within their family ecosystem are also able to be influenced by the youngest members, not just the adults. A second emerging theory here is that children are acute

²⁰⁸ Pink Family Initial Zoom Interview on January 16, 2021, at 0 min., 43 sec.

²⁰⁹ Pink Family Initial Zoom Interview on January 16, 2021, at 18 min., 08 sec.

²¹⁰ See chapter 2, p. 31.

observers of their parent/s' priorities. Rituals are performed to encourage and entrain those actions and values that a family prioritizes. If a child cherishes an activity, for example a budding ritual like wondering together, but their parents are less invested, is there an implicit 'equation' of understanding at play for children? I contend that a child may measure their own value within their family ecosystem system based on how their family members value the rituals that their children value. It may be a simple bedtime ritual or something like the WTP that is introduced from outside the ecosystem. "If you love me + You know I love doing Wondering Together in Our Family = You Demonstrate Your Love by Ensuring We Wonder Together." The converse may be applied in these examples to differing extents. "If my family overlooks wondering which I really enjoy, does that mean they do not value me?" This is simply an emerging theory on my part but worthy of further investigation.

Having a particular 'architecture' (time, space, order) to the wondering ritual imbues it with a sense of comfort, safety, and promise. This second conclusion from Significant Finding #1 may seem obvious if we think back to the importance of ritual referenced in Chapter 2. But striking the balance of developing something that works for most families and feels safe for all was just conjecture on my part (based on my experience and intuition) until folks actually started wondering together as part of this project. Ensuring a sense of safety was implicit in the practice's inception but Mrs. Turquoise was buoyed by the WTP's ability to provide opportunities for adult conversation that felt secure as well. "So, but, it's very nice sitting and talking but not about politics or anything like that, right? It's all just connecting with one another." To which I responded, "... You know, I'm wondering ... if it feels like the time is less

reactive. You're not talking about something, the news whatever, you know, you can just sort of be in the action [of the wondering conversation] instead of reacting to something so much.” “You know, that's probably why I've enjoyed it so much. Connecting with people I love without having anything attached to it,” she summarized.²¹¹

It was surprising and very interesting that I heard two different participants from two different families in two different lines of work express the same sentiment when reflecting on the importance of the practice’s ritual architecture. In describing how their wondering had come to feel deeper and more creative in Week #2, Mr. White focused on the daily repetition of the same questions. “I think just, like, being tired of saying the same thing every day. So, forcing yourself to knock yourself out of [giving the same answers to the repeated questions.]” To which I asked, “To kind of stretch a little bit?” Ms. White (an actress) then said, “You know as Stanislavski once said, ‘Specificity is the key to release.’ Meaning rigid rules allow you to be more.”^{212, 213} Several weeks later, Mr. Turquoise, a recently retired engineer, observed, “There's an aphorism that both engineers and artists like which is that ‘form is liberating,’ a structure to hang your head on... it makes meetings easier. Just, you have a built-in starting point.”²¹⁴ A week later, Mr. Turquoise extended the image when he said, “So I guess a gardening analogy might be... I’m the kind of person who needs a trellis. Well, I can get, I can get larger. I can produce good things but need some support.”²¹⁵ With the synchronicity of Ms. White and

²¹¹ Turquoise Zoom Interview Week #2, February 9, 2021, at 4 min., 23 sec.

²¹² Konstantin Stanislavski was an 19th-20th century Russian actor and acting teacher.

²¹³ White Zoom Interview Week #2, January 28, 2021, at 2 min., 15 sec.

²¹⁴ Turquoise Zoom Interview Week #3, February 16, 2021, at 8 min., 55 sec.

²¹⁵ Turquoise Final Zoom Interview, March 22, 2021, at 15 min., 54 sec.

Mr. Turquoise's similar observations, I was galvanized with a fresh awareness of the role of structure in this ritual: it was an important component but needed to be flexible enough to accommodate the idiosyncratic needs of each family. I believe these two reflections of participants, unbeknownst to one another, signified that the practice had threaded that integral needle of structure and flexibility.

Like the practice of the examen itself, most families chose to wonder together at the end of the day, generally adjacent to dinner time. Mr. and Mrs. White noticed in Week #1 that the practice had the added value of encouraging them to eat at their table and not on their laps.²¹⁶ Their aforementioned Week #3 'muddle' was not helped by the fact that the same week their schedules did not allow for nightly dinners together.²¹⁷ At their initial interview, the Turquoises admitted that they wanted to stop watching television while eating dinner and were hoping wondering together might be an antidote to that family habit.²¹⁸ For the Rose Golds, their weekday rhythm assisted their integration of the practice but in the variability of weekend plans, wondering together was a challenge. "Those are the things I noticed this week. I was like, oh I didn't even think of it over the weekend. Yeah, but it feels like a part of the day when I'm, like, when I have to go into work and have the kind of routine. On days where a routine is disrupted, then all of our routines are disrupted, including this." Mr. Rose Gold agreed, "Yeah, that's true."²¹⁹ Dinner time was not ideal for every family, though. Perhaps the best example

²¹⁶ White Zoom Interview Week #1, January 21, 2021, at 2 min., 21 sec.

²¹⁷ White Zoom Interview Week #3, February 4, 2021, at 2 min., 14 sec.

²¹⁸ Turquoise Zoom Interview Week #2, February 9, 2021, at 4 min., 00 sec.

²¹⁹ Rose Gold Zoom Interview Week #2, February 4, 2021, at 3 min., 10 sec.

was the Teal Family. In our initial interview, Mrs. Teal expressed a high degree of certainty that the family's routine 'down time' from 7:30-8pm would serve as the best time for wondering.²²⁰ By our final interview, the Teal Family had found their morning commute in the car worked far better. Mom Teal observed, "So it ended up being easier in the car because we didn't have any of that stuff, those devices around." I responded, "So you were kind of naturally unplugged anyway?" "Right," she answered.²²¹

Dad Green was well acquainted with the Ignatian examen prior to the research and noted that the way the wondering questions were phrased felt limiting because they sought a single answer unlike the broader invitation of the traditional examen:

It occurred to me as we were going through the process that the way the questions are structured, What is the best thing? What is the thing that you could ...? And so on. Because it was asking for a single example, it didn't invite the breadth of reflection, like multiple. 'Well, I like this and like this and I'm not sure what the best was and so on so.' I would be curious to see what other families have experienced as well.²²²

Dad Green makes a key distinction here between the traditional examen and this adaptation. Because the wondering together ritual led to deeper discussions in some form or another for all eleven families, there was an apparent progression from simple, single responses. My conclusion is that the questions as phrased in the WTP might represent the best entry point into the practice of the examen for those inexperienced in ritual group reflection. I sensed that a broadening towards the expansiveness of the original examen was unfolding and would continue with time and experience.

²²⁰ Teal Zoom Initial Interview, January 18, 2021, at 15 min., 42 sec.

²²¹ Teal Zoom Final Interview, February 16, 2021, at 3 min., 47 sec.

²²² Green Final Zoom Interview, February 14, 2021, at 15 min., 34 sec. The underlines are mine to capture Dad Green's emphasis in the conversation.

The Wondering Stones represent a serendipitous finding because they played an unforeseen and beneficial role in the ritual. I chose to have the four original wondering questions printed up on stone coasters at the photo department of Walgreens. Thinking it would serve as a physical reminder of the ritual questions as well as a thank-you gift for participating, I sent them off to every family by mail with their permission. Without any prompting, each family referred to the stone at some point in our interviews as having been integrated into their wondering practice. For some, the stone served as a prompt, for others it was something for the ‘asker’ to hold, for others it encouraged reading skills for children, and for some it held the candle that was used in that family’s wondering ritual. I heard from every family that the Wondering Stone was appreciated. For further research in family rituals such as the WTP, a physical representation like the Wondering Stone is an important variable to consider.

The value of spending time together in fresh and dependable ways offers the sustainable family ecosystem another tool by which to enhance their tensile strength. Small gestures that rang true seemed to enhance the connection to one another and to the ritual. The Rose Golds began by holding hands and included their dog. The Green and Turquoise families lit candles. The Mr. Beasts closed with a ritual ‘dab.’²²³ “We always finish with a thank-you dab, which cracks us up every time.”²²⁴ The wondering ritual, including all of its idiosyncrasies as adapted by each family, enhances the sustainable family ecosystem in its inherently countercultural way of spending time together and

²²³ Dabbing, or the dab, is a simple gesture in which a person drops their head into the bent crook of a slanted, upwardly angled arm, while raising the opposite arm out straight in a parallel direction. From Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dab_\(dance\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dab_(dance)) .

²²⁴ Mom Mr. Beast in Mr. Beast Week #2 email, February 6, 2021.

finding connection and re-connection there. In the next significant finding, we will explore the evidence as to why that might be.

Significant Finding #2:

The daily practice of wondering together fosters fresh avenues for connection and re-connection to both self and family but the work is not necessarily simple (even if the practice might be.) The ongoing invitation to witness and accompany one another serves to ensure that the ‘fabric of connectivity’ in a sustainable family ecosystem is attentively and lovingly nurtured.²²⁵

In the big picture, the quantitative evidence was strong that the WTP was perceived as a method for deepening connection to self and others.²²⁶ The “Connection Totals by Week” graph illustrates the sense of connection both to self and participating family members increasing in the first two weeks likely due to confidence and experience with the practice. The decline in Week #3 is attributable to the ‘muddle’ with a significant rise in the sense of connection to family at the conclusion of the experience at the time of the final interview. But what statistics fail to capture is just how hard making and sustaining these deep connections can be. I heard accounts of sublime connection but, sometimes, the stories detailed how difficult it was to show up and wonder when the lives you were living were as messy or dull or challenging or complex as they had been all along, especially in a pandemic. But even with all that ‘reality,’ there were triumphs on the other side of practice and perseverance when families showed up daily to wonder. In the paragraphs ahead, I offer glimpses at what families shared with me as they moved

²²⁵ Steiner-Adair, 262.

²²⁶ See Appendix U, “Connection Code Totals by Week.”

from novice to more experienced practitioners of wondering together and how their family fabric of connectivity became more layered.

For the Cobalts, the WTP was a welcome opportunity to ‘go deeper’ both as a couple and as individuals. For Ms. Cobalt, as for many, the experience kindled a sense of attunement to her interior life throughout the day. “Some days. Well, I have to say, it makes me more mindful of what's going on in my day because I think about it during the day. Oh, this is what I'm going to talk about when we talk about what made me feel most alive or you know, what I wanted to leave out.”²²⁷ Perhaps this sense of personal agency contributed to their enthusiasm for the journey they took together over their month of wondering. At Week #1, Ms. Cobalt said, “I think it's going great. I think we've had better conversations that we've had in a very long time.” As the conversation continued, she observed a few minutes later:

Sally, I have, I'm just sitting here kind of chuckling to myself because this thought just came to me. Years ago, we went for marriage counseling and it was, the marriage counseling was a total disaster. What we finally realized was we were having a much more productive session out in the in the waiting room, as we sat in the waiting room talking to each other. We finally said ‘what the hell, the heck with the therapist. We don't need the therapist. We just need to talk to each other... It's kind of like God's therapy.’²²⁸

Mr. Cobalt agreed and noted that it cost a lot less!

The Turquoises set off on the journey together with one of their children, an adult daughter living at home, in the periphery of their wondering practice. At Week #1, the WTP was feeling more natural for one Turquoise than the other. When I asked if there

²²⁷ Ms. Cobalt in Cobalt Zoom Interview Week #1, January 24, 2021, at 1 min., 10 sec.

²²⁸ Ms. Cobalt in Cobalt Zoom Interview Week #1, January 24, 2021, at 10 min., 41 sec.

were any challenges in wondering together, Mrs. Turquoise responded, “I don't, I can't think of anything. I am really very much enjoying it. I actually like the ritual of coming together, lighting a candle, and sitting and talking.” After I reiterated that I had no expectations but was truly curious to know how it was going, Mr. Turquoise weighed in. “So, I'm starting to notice that it's starting to feel like an assignment to me.”²²⁹ The Turquoises continued in the WTP for an extended month due to Mrs. Turquoise's COVID illness. When we came together for our final interview, I heard from them just how hard it is to show-up for this ‘simple’ daily ritual. Ms. Turquoise said, “I think we've spent a lot of time avoiding talking because many of the things that we have to talk about are painful.” Mr. Turquoise excused himself to feed the cat but returned shortly. Mrs. Turquoise continued,

“So, doing this gave us a tool with which to kind of reconnect. When our kids were young. I mean no family is perfect and things are, there's always struggles no, no matter what stage of your life, but it's been considerably harder for the last 10 to 12 years. So, I think we tend to eat in front of the TV as our escape, because then we don't have to talk about hard things.” To which I offered, “Yeah, so it was sort of a radical act of bravery to sign up to do this, wasn't it?” Mr. Turquoise replied, “Yeah.”²³⁰

While the WTP invited the Turquoises into new avenues to talk about challenging things, for others it was an invitation that they were not all that excited about accepting. It seemed especially stressful for some families to show up and wonder when their day had been less than ideal, particularly in the first few weeks of the practice. For the Rose Golds, the WTP invited connection through self-awareness. During the pandemic, Mr. Rose Gold worked from home and kept company with their sweet dog while Ms. Rose

²²⁹ Turquoise Zoom Interview Week #1, February 1, 2021, at 7 min., 33 sec.

²³⁰ Turquoise Final Zoom Interview, March 22, 2021, at 16 min., 24 sec.

Gold went into her place of employment each day. Coming home and wondering around dinner time was an opportunity that was not always easy. This exchange with the Rose Gold illustrates that conundrum:

“Well, I think the biggest thing is that we both had, like, stressful days this week where we had to sit down, [chuckles] ‘had to.’ We still committed ourselves to sitting down and doing the wondering activity and, we, it was, it served sometimes, it's like, I found that, I found that in those moments, I didn't want to go deep,” said Mr. Rose Gold. He continued, “I kind of, this [the daily wondering] was much shorter, which looking back, I found interesting. Like I would think, I would hypothesize that I would have probably wanted to, like, vent or talk and let go and on really tough days, I was kind of like, I just was short. I was kind of just, like, to the point and it was actually days where I felt like it was a good day where I kind of wanted to explore more and talk more and all that stuff. Right?” To which Ms. Rose Gold observed, “It's hard to wonder about [challenging] stuff, like, I don't want to wonder about it.” To which Mr. Rose Gold agreed, “Yeah.”²³¹

Sometimes the practice held up a mirror to glimpse things not yet brought to light. For Mom Yellow, the practice allowed her to recognize the strain that their young twins were adding to their busy lives, especially because they were both working outside their home during the pandemic.

We have done our Wondering Together every night after the babies go to bed and I LOVE it! I didn't realize how we quickly are off doing other/separate things when the babies go to bed. It has also opened up conversations I didn't know I needed— like the question of “what would you have liked to leave out” and I was able to realize and express the weight of meal planning/prepping/grocery shopping every week. [Dad Yellow] had no idea, so he has started planning and prepping a few meals a week. Little things that turned out to be huge.²³²

²³¹ Rose Gold Zoom Interview Week #2, February 4, 2021, at 1 min., 43 sec.

²³² Mom Yellow in Week #1 email, January 31, 2021.

The wondering time together allowed personal agency to catalyze into changes that relieved some of Mom Yellow's stress and added to the enhancement of the family ecosystem.

Sometimes, that same mirror that a family held during wondering reflected back a tensile strength that was abundant but unrecognized. At the White's final interview, Mr. White expressed a fresh awareness that whatever he brought to the wondering, even if it felt heavy, could be borne by Ms. White:

“... like I think I've always tried like to ask [Ms. White] at the end of the day, like, ‘how was your day?’ ‘what happened, let's talk about it.’ I think this [ritual] has made it easier. I'm someone who, if I'm frustrated, I like to just say what I'm frustrated about ... I like to verbalize it and then I can let go of it. And I do that but I also feel guilty doing that sometimes, like putting my boring work frustrations on other people. So this has been a helpful, like, reason to be able to do it and I think ... I can tell now that like it doesn't bother [Ms. White] or like weigh her down or anything like that.”²³³

Perhaps the thread that felt the strongest in all of the experiences of connection and reconnection was the appreciation of taking the time to really listen to one another. While these short episodes of daily wondering seemed to serve as a bit of sabbath within an ordinary day, there were also instances of individuals finding their voice in fresh ways within their family as they practiced wondering together. So often the gift was simply the space to speak and be heard, regardless of the content. Mr. Pink summarized this as he equated his sense of empowerment with that of being in possession of the conch from William Golding's novel, *The Lord of the Flies*:

Me: So, I wonder what you learned, and you don't have to tell me anything specific, but what did you learn about yourself? And what did you learn about your family in doing this?

²³³ White Final Zoom Interview, February 11, 2021, at 4 min., 04 sec.

Mr. Pink: Guess it kind of felt like, it gives us an opportunity to listen to each other's feelings at that time. And also [it] gave me a chance to see something that was going on, positive or negative. You're kind of, were given the floor and having the opportunity to talk about that while you're trying to do your question.

Me: Yeah. I haven't thought about that term, but 'you have the floor' like you've got that. That's a great term. Thank you.

Mr. Pink: You have the conch.^{234 235}

In her Family Resilience Theory, Froma Walsh maintained “*A hallmark of a resilient family is direct, clear, consistent, and honest communication and the capacity to tolerate the open expression of emotion.*”²³⁶ In these examples, the data suggest that there were opportunities for participating families to hold space for both the open expression of emotion as well as the ability to encourage one another in the expression of those feelings. It strikes me that while this ritual serves to strengthen a family, it is likely to kindle a family ethos with an increased capacity for ‘sharing the conch’ within the greater community. If we offer one another the gift of this ‘conch’ at home in this daily ritual, then how could it not spill into our communities as an entrained shalom?

Significant Finding #3:

The Wondering Questions served the ritual and did so with a structured flexibility.

²³⁴ Pink Final Zoom Interview, February 14, 2021, at 4 min., 18 sec.

²³⁵ The ‘conch’ is a reference to the conch shell in William Golding’s mid-20th century (1954) novel *Lord of the Flies*, wherein young schoolboys are stranded and are challenged to fashion a communal sense of order. When a boy ‘has the conch,’ he has sole authority to speak without interruption. In some contexts, a talking stick serves the same purpose for a group.

²³⁶ Froma Walsh cited in William R. Saltzman, “The FOCUS Family Resilience Program: An Innovative Family Intervention for Trauma and Loss,” *Family Process* 55, no. 4 (December 13, 2016): pp. 647-659, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12250>, 650.

Having used the original four wondering questions in many Godly Play® circles of children and folks of mixed ages, those questions have proven themselves over decades to be a sublime way to unpack narratives and theologically reflect on sacred stories from the Christian tradition. But so many Godly Play® practitioners know them to be a facile, trustworthy, and trust-inducing framework for getting to the heart of anything – church meetings, pastoral conversations, pre-marital counseling, funeral planning, and so much more. So, it is no surprise that these wondering questions provided the WTP with its solid foundation. Here, I will focus on how the questions themselves served the families. I will also illustrate which questions were provocative, why that might be, and how adding an optional fifth question served this research endeavor.

The four original wondering questions were offered to the families in three ways as part of the WTP.²³⁷ Initial exposure was online. Every adult who registered did so through the website, where a basic explanation of the practice was offered on the home page.²³⁸ However, reviewing the questions was not a requirement to link to the questionnaires and consents, so not all participants engaged with them there. The second encounter was at the time of our initial interview. I reviewed the four original wondering questions with each family and we role played how it might work to wonder together as a family once a day. Lastly, families were encouraged to print them up for reference if they

²³⁷ To review, the four original adapted wondering questions for the WTP are:

1. I wonder what part of today you liked the best?
2. I wonder what part of today was the most important part?
3. I wonder when you felt most alive today?
4. I wonder what part of today you would have liked to leave out?

²³⁸ <https://sites.google.com/view/wonderingtogetherproject/home>

had not yet received a Wondering Stone by mail. To ensure that, I would send an email before or after our conversation with the questions exactly as they appeared on the stone attached for easy printing and reference.²³⁹

The ritual order of the questions is significant. I often describe that order as a path of breadcrumbs that invite you deeper and deeper into the reflective experience. While I did not stipulate that the order of the questions was sacrosanct, their numbering implicitly underscored the expected pattern that I had introduced at the initial interview. This recalls Mr. Turquoise's and Ms. White's observations that 'form is freeing.' With experience and a sense of confidence in the practice, a few families reordered the questions to enhance their sense of comfort. My response was always, "This is your practice. I really want to know how it works or changes for your family." For example, Dad Yellow observed, "we go out of order a lot which I didn't realize but it makes sense because different discussions lead into different questions."²⁴⁰ Earlier in this chapter, I detailed how the Cobalts had reordered the wondering questions as well.

The ritual order of the questions was also a source of safety and predictability as described by the Teal Family in their final interview. 19-year-old Eldest Daughter Teal, like her siblings, came into the Teal home through the foster care system. As we came close to the end of our time together, I observed, "I saw [Eldest Daughter Teal] in the background shaking her head, 'Yes,' a little bit [in answer to my final question as to

²³⁹ The printable versions as shared with the families are included as Appendix V. Later a version with the 5th Question was developed and is attached here as Appendix W.

²⁴⁰ Mom Yellow in Week #2 email exchange, February 9, 2021.

whether the WTP helped families talk about ‘big things.’]” Then Eldest Daughter Teal said softly, “I like it...It’s fun too...” Mom Teal then observed:

But I think for her, she would thank you because she gets kind of anxious and nervous about what to ask and what not to ask. ... And I think that's just part of who she is, like, from childhood trauma. To be worried about, like, asking the wrong thing, but I have seen her, like, open up a little bit more and be a little bit more be a little bit more... I've seen her be a little more like testing the waters like asking or the questions like, because it always doesn't come from that her own dialect.²⁴¹

For the Teal Family, the dependability of the ritual pattern invited new ways of relating for their eldest daughter that she valued and enjoyed. This recalls the understanding from the work of Friesen in Chapter 2 who noted that rituals stimulate both brain hemispheres to “[facilitate] personal integration and the feeling of well-being.”²⁴² In a sustainable family ecosystem, when one individual grows, their collective tensile strength is enhanced and the whole family benefits.

For Mr. White, the ritual order of the questions “... forces us out of like ‘fine’ and forces us to talk about more stuff. That opens more doors to talk about things, which I like.”²⁴³ By Week #2, this couple had found a ‘cadence’ to their practice and felt no need to change the order of the questions.²⁴⁴ Instead, what they were leaning into was the fact that if you passed on certain questions on multiple days in a row, “you know, probably, something needs to change.”²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ Teal Final Zoom Interview, February 21, 2021, at 10 min., 33 sec.

²⁴² John D Friesen, “Rituals and Family Strength,” *Direction* 19, no. 1 (1990): pp. 39-48, 46-7.

²⁴³ Mr. White in White Zoom Interview Week #1, January 21, 2021 at 8 min., 52 sec.

²⁴⁴ Mr. White in White Zoom Interview Week #2, January 28, 2021, at 1 min., 38 sec.

²⁴⁵ Mr. White in White Zoom Interview Week #2, January 28, 2021, at 6 min., 07 sec.

As families became increasingly experienced practitioners of the WTP, some adapted the ritual as the Cobalts did when they reordered the questions. Similarly, Mr. Yellow started to feel like he gave the same answers to the first three questions while Mrs. Yellow wrote, “I disagree but that’s his take.”²⁴⁶ When coding the data, I noted every time a family “personalized or adapted the questions.”²⁴⁷ Appendix X demonstrates that families expressed the greatest sense of agency to personalize the WTP questions at the time of the final interview.²⁴⁸

I turn my attention now to the specific questions themselves. In general, there was little direct feedback or challenge to the first three of the ritual wondering questions. One provision that I routinely made was to offer alternate phrasing for the third question as it could be elusive, especially for younger, concrete thinkers. The original Godly Play® Sacred Story question was phrased, “I wonder where you are in this story or what part of this story is about you?”²⁴⁹ For the WTP, I used adapted language that helped mine for the place of deepest connection during the day by asking, “I wonder when you felt most alive today?”²⁵⁰ That question was readily understood by adults but more challenging to unpack for young children. So, I offered alternate phrasing at the initial interview: “I wonder when you felt the most energy today?” I also noticed that families would adapt the language for certain questions in ways that felt equivalent to them, as was their

²⁴⁶ Mom Yellow in Week #2 email, February 9, 2021.

²⁴⁷ Code R-8: Personalizing, adapting the wondering question/s.

²⁴⁸ See Appendix X, “R-8 Code Totals by Week.”

²⁴⁹ Jerome Berryman et al., *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 2, Revised and Expanded* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017), 83.

²⁵⁰ This question synthesizes the work of both Berryman and the Linns. Linn et al., 7

choice. When the Yellow Family referred to the “best part of your day” question and the “worst part,” I felt myself bristle as I was so accustomed to the traditional language used in Godly Play®.²⁵¹ In the end, the intent of their questions stayed true to the initial ones offered in the WTP materials. While I was delighted that they had tailored the practice to suit their family, I was aware of my own interior reaction in that regard.

The Fourth Question “I wonder what part of today you would have liked to leave out?”

Ms. Cobalt: ... I mean one of the things that we talked about one time was that, um, that question we wanted to move because for [Mr. Cobalt] it felt very negative. And I understand that. It has, you know, ‘what do you want to leave out?’ What's the negative, basically, that you want to leave out? And, on the other hand, I think that it often leads to some pretty important conversation.

Me: That question has just been a place of importance in our conversations together and what I'm taking away, what I'm hearing is, as challenging as it was at first, it feels pretty vital as part of the conversation. It feels like it would be missed if it wasn't in there.

Ms. Cobalt: Yeah. And, yet, having it as the last question, kind of leaves a negative taste in your mouth.²⁵²

In parsing the wondering questions, the fourth question yielded the most energy and data. The Cobalts rearranged the order of the questions so that they did not need to end their wondering “on a downer.”²⁵³ For most others, the fourth question was mentioned at some point in the course of our research conversations and families felt it

²⁵¹ Yellow Final Zoom Interview, February 21, 2021, at 0 min., 33 sec.

²⁵² Cobalt Zoom Interview Week #3, February 7, 2021, at 7 min., 33 sec.

²⁵³ Cobalt Initial Phone Interview, January 17, 2021. (see Field Notes.)

generally became easier with time and practice. Mr. Rose Gold found it helpful in identifying “what was making me stressed.”²⁵⁴ Ms. Rose Gold observed:

... ‘what would you leave out today?’ is not the way I would ever phrase, like, what was the bad part of your day? Like that is not how I would phrase it because it also, like I said to [Mr. Rose Gold] yesterday, I was, like, I didn't have anything that I would necessarily leave out of my day. The day was a perfectly good, fine. I mean I would leave out going to work.²⁵⁵

While the question might be a challenge, it was also a solace when it served as a way to name the troubles on one’s heart and to set aside the concerns of the day. Mom Mr. Beast shared in Week #3 that Son Mr. Beast “had a breakthrough mid-week – telling us about something that had been bothering him at school and causing a lot of moodiness for a few days.”²⁵⁶ Mr. and Ms. White agreed that “... there are some nights we'll get into something and then we'll be like, okay, ... I'm glad we did that and now we can sort of be like, we can put that down for the night, you know as opposed to like slightly carrying it for the rest of the day.”²⁵⁷ I felt the tug of recognition on my own heartstrings when 12-year-old Daughter Lime Green captured what the fourth question offered her. “It's really nice to do it at the end of the day before you go to bed. Because then you have, like, like if you ask a question, like ‘what would you like to leave it out of your day?’ It's good to kind of like get that off your chest and then it's easier to go to sleep for me.”²⁵⁸ I wonder what the world might be like if more of us, especially our children, felt safe enough to name their worries and then lay them down before they sleep?

²⁵⁴ Rose Gold Zoom Interview Week#2, February 4, 2021, at 5 min, 16 sec.

²⁵⁵ Rose Gold Final Zoom Interview, February 18, 2021, at 16 min., 24 sec.

²⁵⁶ Mr. Beast Week# 3 email, February 14, 2021.

²⁵⁷ Ms. White in White Final Zoom Interview on February 11, 2021, at Final 9 min., 51 sec.

²⁵⁸ Lime Green Final Zoom Interview, April 7, 2021, at 3 min., 30 sec.

While not part of the WTP research cohort *per se*, I mentioned in Chapter 3 that St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Cohasset, Massachusetts was a willing partner in the wondering together effort. My friend and Godly Play® colleague, Nancy St. John, shared the initial research invitation with the Rev. Maggie Arnold, St. Stephen’s rector. This parish is steeped in the Godly Play® tradition so the WTP appealed to them as an opportunity for a shared at-home Lenten offering. Rev. Arnold reflected on the value of this fourth question in her sermon for the second Sunday in Lent. The observations she offers regarding the fourth question make it important to quote the sermon’s last paragraph in its entirety:

We’ve been asking these questions, at our house at dinnertime this Lent, wondering about each other’s days, and hearing about joys discovered, important things achieved, times when we felt energized. **The last question is always, “I wonder what part of today you would leave out?” When we listen to that, we are making space to learn about what was hard for someone. We are acknowledging that even though the person wouldn’t have chosen to have that experience or reality in their day, it was there. It couldn’t be left out, however much we would want that.** And I am grateful that Sally Thomas, the author of this Lent devotional practice, has written it so that there’s nothing that comes after that fourth question, no insistence on better luck tomorrow, or how could you have improved that bad time. Just admitting it, making time for it, telling the story and hearing the story, the hard, real story of sadness or awkwardness, guilt or anger, or just confusion—“why did it have to be that way?” Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion is clearly the part Peter would have left out if he could. Jesus would have left it out, too, actually, as we hear in his anguished prayer from the Garden of Gethsemane. But he didn’t leave it out. The horror of human hatred and violence was real, was Jesus’ experience because it is our experience. There is no resurrection, without Good Friday. There is no resilience, without taking the time for grief. **As we take that time together, let’s give thanks, too, for the gift of someone who is listening. It is no small thing, to have someone who will ask, how was your day, and really listen. That is the work of the angels.**²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Margaret Arnold. “All the Way Down.” (Sermon, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Cohasset, MA, <https://ststephenscohasset.org/Sermons>, February 28, 2021). Bolded text is mine for emphasis.

What Rev. Arnold captures so eloquently here is the importance of that rich and prickly fourth question; how it is a nimble inducement to behold the full experience of one's life and to bear witness to those we love. So why was that such a challenge for some? I wonder if the pace of our lives and our digital opportunities to interface indirectly facilitate our avoidance of those things in our daily experience that are difficult or overwhelming. Enough work, enough bytes, enough distraction yield less comfort with discomfort. As Catherine Steiner-Adair notes about teens, text messaging is "taking the place of conversation with themselves – the capacity for reflection – that enables them to sit alone, think about things, and come to insights."²⁶⁰ I believe the circle of digital distraction is far wider than just teens and I understand that many of us welcome the opportunity for these kinds of diversions; a busyness that offers relief from big, challenging, uncomfortable feelings. Yet, there are some families who have a broader existential lexicon already in place that allows them to sit with the discomfort as Rev. Arnold describes about her own family. Perhaps the skill set to do so is becoming increasingly rare in the 21st century and requires intentional cultivation, modeling, and normalizing. I also sense that communities (including faith communities) have historically served as the places to experience and nurture the skills to sit with personal, familial, and communal discomfort. The 21st century is characterized by a more siloed existence with less community connection (evident in declining mainline church participation), societal reshaping, and the increased use of digital distractions. Together, these trends may coalesce in the social discomfort that many, including Steiner-Adair, detail in their commentary on the realities of modern family life. Perhaps that is the pearl

²⁶⁰ Steiner-Adair, 63.

that a ritual like wondering together engenders over time – an evolving comfort with feeling uncomfortable.

If that is true, then our call to enhance a family’s existential lexicon is two-fold. First, we need to recognize that not all families have cultivated the existential skill set to sit with the challenges that the fourth question distills. Whether the loss of quiet reflection in our day-to-day experiences, the hyper-engagement of digital technology, or both, it is harder for the uninitiated to sit with and explore uncomfortable emotions. So, it is constructive to offer practices that help acquire these skills. Second, those ritual practices must be inviting and engaging in order that we may learn together how to hold one another with care in those ‘fourth question reflections.’ While novice wonderers await the “resilience that comes from grief” that Rev. Arnold explores, we need to offer a practice that welcomes and provides a sense of safety, too, so all can benefit and bloom in that “work of the angels,” that of deep listening.²⁶¹

The Fifth Question “I wonder how you are feeling in this moment?”

Rev. Arnold’s sermon describes far better than I can why the fourth question should not be fixed or made ‘all better’ by an attendant question. I appreciate the nuance of her conclusion: “no insistence on better luck tomorrow, or how could you have improved that bad time. Just admitting it, making time for it, telling the story and hearing the story, the hard, real story of sadness or awkwardness, guilt or anger, or just

²⁶¹ Margaret Arnold sermon.

confusion—'why did it have to be that way?'"²⁶² I believe the addition of this particular fifth question does none of those things. Instead, it enhances the totality of the wondering together experience.

Me: “Yeah, great and just to circle back on that fifth question. So, you added that? Can you just share a little bit about what it changed or what you noticed?”

Ms. Rose Gold: It helped end on more of a high note in my opinion. It, like, because, by the time we've talked through all of it and to be fair, we had pretty good weeks, but like the end being, like, how are you? A lot of times it was like sleepy and content and good and it was just like a nice little like button on it of like not just down. You know what we have been doing but where we are right now.

Mr. Rose Gold: Yeah.

Ms. Rose Gold: It was a nice like button to carry us genuinely into the night the rest of our night, whatever we end up doing.²⁶³

Mr. Rose Gold: ... but there was something nice at the end of the day about being, like, reminding myself that no matter what happened in the day prior, like, how I'm feeling right now is, it's like a bit was getting me back to the present a little bit.”²⁶⁴

While the Rose Golds and most families reported that the fifth question was placed as the last question of their practice, the Turquoises used it to begin their wondering together conversations once the question had been introduced. “Well, the last question, number five, when you added the ‘how are you feeling now?’ We often led with that question once that was introduced.”²⁶⁵

²⁶² Margaret Arnold sermon.

²⁶³ Rose Gold Final Zoom Interview, February 18, 2021, at 3 min., 43 sec.

²⁶⁴ Rose Gold Final Zoom Interview, February 18, 2021, at 4: min., 35 sec.

²⁶⁵ Turquoise Final Zoom Interview, March 22, 2021, 20 min., 15 sec.

As noted earlier in this chapter, families were usually introduced to the fifth question in Week #2. I followed up in Week #3 to see whether it had been adopted and, if so, how it was going.²⁶⁶ By the final interview there were a small number of positive responses with only a single negative code.²⁶⁷ Because the number of data points is few compared with those around connection and impact, future investigation with a larger data set would be beneficial to obtaining quantitative data that enhances the understanding around the role of the fifth question.

The addition of the fifth question at the midpoint served three key roles in the WTP. First, it added a note of closure, this “little button,” at the end of the practice that the Rose Golds described.²⁶⁸ Second, the question helped distill one’s feelings and enhanced the emotional intelligence of all gathered, the entire family. There is an inherent invitation to be seen and loved by this circle of kin for more than what you shared about your day but for who you are and how you feel in that moment. In doing so, there is a cultivation of emotional attunement within the family. In Walsh’s work on family resilience, she cites *Open Emotional Expression* as one of the nine Key Processes in her Family Resilience Theory.²⁶⁹ The purpose of this open emotional expression is fourfold: sharing a range of feelings, cultivating mutual empathy and tolerance for

²⁶⁶ Appendix Y, “Codes Related to Fifth Question by Week.”

²⁶⁷ The only R-12 negative code regarding the fifth question was generated by the Cobalt Final Interview. After planning to adopt the fifth question, they stated that they had forgotten to do so when I circled back at the time of the final interview. As it was neither informational (R-10) or a positive reaction to the fifth question (R-11), it was coded R-12 (negative.) Going forward, I will expand the Code Book to reflect fifth question omission with detailed reasoning subcodes.

²⁶⁸ Rose Gold Final Zoom Interview, February 18, 2021, at 3 min., 54 sec.

²⁶⁹ Walsh, 17.

differences, taking responsibility for one's own feelings, and engendering pleasurable interactions, including humor.²⁷⁰

The third role this fifth question serves is one of neurobiology. As discussed in Chapter 2, naming one's current feeling or emotion (*affect naming*) is a practice of self-awareness but also serves to enhance the communal empathy of a family. The naming of a powerful emotion decreases the elevated stress hormone cortisol if activated as well as the likelihood of cortisol dysregulation over time. While I am not arguing that adding the fifth question necessarily improves health, I believe the research in the field suggests that any practice that aids emotional awareness and fosters family empathy must be considered potentially impactful in promoting physical and emotional health through improved cortisol regulation, emotional awareness, and synthesis of greater tensile strength in the sustainable family ecosystem.

*"Maybe stories are just data with a soul and maybe I am just a storyteller."*²⁷¹

Brené Brown

In review, the Wondering Together Project was imperfect; the thesis question was challenging to measure, the cohort was statistically small, the study period relatively short, and the pandemic made for a strange common denominator. And yet, the project

²⁷⁰ Walsh, 17.

²⁷¹ Brené Brown, (viewed 2021), https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en#t-59365.

was also remarkable with every family feeling inspired to continue wondering in some form because they felt more connected and more known. Family ecosystems were enhanced and renewed. For a secular practice with no mention of God, I see signs of the Holy One in all of it. And so, I am convinced that shalom for the world needs to be seeded in ordinary homes, by ordinary people doing their best to be a family despite their unique challenges.

In the next chapter, I will look to the future of the Wondering Together Project now enriched by all that has been gleaned.

Chapter 5: What Was Learned and What's Next: Conclusion

“Hello, Dr. Senge. It’s a great honor for us to have you with us. Your image is being projected to about five hundred pastors. I imagine this is a different kind of crowd than you normally address. What would you like to say to a group of five hundred Christian ministers?”

“Well, Brian [McLaren], you’re right. I don’t normally speak to pastors. Actually, I was thinking about that very question yesterday when I was in a large bookstore. I asked the bookstore manager what the most popular books are these days. Most popular he said, were books about how to get rich in the new information economy, which didn’t surprise me.

“Second most popular, the manager said, were books about spirituality, and in particular, books about Buddhism. And so when I thought about speaking to five hundred Christian pastors today, I thought I’d begin by asking you all a question: why are books on Buddhism so popular, and not books on Christianity?”

“Well, Dr Senge,” I said, trying not to sound as clumsy as I felt, “how would you answer that question?”

He replied, “I think it’s because Buddhism presents itself as a way of life, and Christianity presents itself as a system of belief [*sic*]. So I would want to get Christian ministers thinking about how to rediscover their own faith as a way life, because that’s what people are searching for today. That’s what they need more.”²⁷²

In this exchange lies the crux of what the Wondering Together Project revealed: families are seeking *a way of life*; something that nurtures who they are as individuals

²⁷² Brian D. McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 2-3. In an interview with Dr. Peter Senge (senior lecturer at MIT with a focus on system dynamics, author of *The Fifth Discipline*) at a conference for Christian pastors, Brian McLaren relates this story that gets to the heart of the matter.

and how they witness one another within the shifting sands of the early 21st century. It follows that identifying and living into that way of life will benefit the tensile strength of a family's ecosystem.

While this project's thesis question was bold enough to suggest that the WTP would expand a family's existential lexicon, there was not enough time or data to draw that conclusion definitively. Even so, I have offered analyses that suggest that what was revealed to families who adopted this ritual for a month was measurably and positively impactful. Across the cohort, families displayed an affinity for an enriching ritual that pointed towards a new way of life; one that promised the daily gift of attentiveness to self and to the family members with whom they live. "The great gift of being listened to," as Rev. Maggie Arnold noted, became a valuable family practice for the four-week research period.²⁷³ An experience so generative that each family voiced a commitment to continued wondering together in a form that suited their particular ecosystem after the research period ended.

This ethnographic research was significant to both the families and this researcher. As I summarize what the research revealed, many of the idiosyncratic family narratives return to me as testimony to the value of a family 'at ritual.' These families evidenced a woven 'communal fabric' that was enhanced as they shared time together in the Wondering Together Project. Highlights of what was revealed include:

- **The positive impact of introducing this simple family ritual happened quickly and deepened over time:** After a single week of the WTP, many

²⁷³ Margaret Arnold, Sermon.

families expressed an appreciation for the practice in the life of their family. After two weeks, many families sensed that their connection had deepened while participating in the daily ritual.

- **Individual impact was measurable even in the setting of a family ritual.**

While this was a family centered ritual, the data revealed that participants expressed a positive personal impact as well as a familial one, suggesting that family rituals have multiple layers of generativity.

- **The ritual was deemed valuable by children and they were often the**

‘keepers of the practice.’ This indicated both the impact and value in this short, daily ritual. I also argued the WTP enhances the tensile strength of a family ecosystem by ensuring trustworthy daily encounters that feel valuable and vital for each of its participating members, whatever their age. Each member becomes a reflection of the family ethos and mythos and that deepens with experience. Having a particular ‘architecture’ (time, space, order) to the wondering ritual imbues it with a sense of comfort, safety, and promise.

- **The wondering questions served the ritual and did so with a structured**

flexibility. The addition of the fifth question served as a practical neurological intervention for cortisol regulation as well as a revelatory last question in the ritual. Families felt ownership in the practice over time and with experience and manipulated the questions to reflect their idiosyncratic family ethos.

- **Impact beyond the family.** In a sustainable family ecosystem, when one individual grows, their collective tensile strength is enhanced and the whole family benefits. While this ritual serves to strengthen a family, I suggest that it

may also kindle a family's disposition for an increased capacity for 'sharing the conch' within the greater community. If we offer one another the gift of this 'conch' at home in this daily ritual, then how could it not spill into the community as an entrained shalom as members move through their wider world?

Despite its secular construction, I have argued that this research has practical theological implications that invite further study. I feel called to two next steps. First, I plan to continue the research. That includes expanding the model to allow for crowdsourcing of data, willing participants mentoring others in the practice if they feel called, lengthening the research period, and using a five-question model from the start. I will need research partners for this work and am currently networking in that regard. I am hopeful that they will assist me in expanding the racial and socio-economic limitations of the initial project. Second, I would like to pursue publication in a peer reviewed journal in order that other researchers may access this small study within the body of family ritual research. I hope to contribute as an act of thanksgiving for all the shared research across other disciplines from which this study benefitted.

Ultimately, I imagine the Wondering Together Project as a contributing fiber to the tensile flexibility of the family ecosystem we envision for our wider world. Gordon Flett's research around *mattering* seems a compelling lens as does the ritual's role as a

protective factor for emotional health and against substance misuse.²⁷⁴ These are areas that professional contacts have suggested are worth pursuing.

Lastly, I offer one observation for further study that was seeded in my field notes as I spoke with families throughout the pandemic. In those notes I speculated that parental stress might be mediated if parents were able to have a short weekly conversation with an invested thought partner who served in a role akin to a secular spiritual companion. No fixing or judging, just someone to serve them as ‘holy listener.’

Whatever has been roused by this small research project, God has accompanied all of it and I am hopeful that it has left an imprint for good in each participating family’s ecosystem. May the month-long *way of life* revealed in these families’ experience of the Wondering Together Project be a spark of *shalom* for our world.

²⁷⁴ Gordon L. Flett, “The Psychology of Mattering,” *The Psychology of Mattering*, 2018, pp. 295-305, <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-809415-0.00014-1>.

*Prayer of Abandonment**(original)**Father,*

*I abandon myself into your hands;
 Do with me what you will.
 Whatever you may do, I thank you:
 I am ready for all, I accept all.
 Let only your will be done in me,
 And in all your creatures –
 I wish no more than this, O Lord.*

*Into your hands I commend my soul;
 I offer it to you with all the love
 Of my heart. For I love you, Lord,
 And so need to give myself,
 To surrender myself into your hands,
 Without reserve, and with boundless
 confidence,
 For you are my Father.*

*Brother Charles of Jesus**Prayer of Abandonment**(Wondering Together Version)**Loving God,*

*I abandon myself into your hands;
 Do with me what you will.
 Whatever you may do, I thank you:
 I am ready for all, I accept all.
 Let only your will be done in me,
 And in all your creatures –
 I wish no more than this, O Lord.*

*Into your hands I commend these beloved
 people and this work.
 I offer the participants, the project, and
 myself with all the love of my heart.
 For I love you, Lord,
 And so need to give myself,
 To surrender myself into your hands,
 Without reserve, and with boundless
 confidence,
 For you are my Strength and my Hope*

*Brother Charles of Jesus,
 adapted by Sally Thomas*

Assessment of Risk to Human Subjects in Research

Instructions

Read each statement carefully, then mark with an “X” either the non-shaded or not applicable (NA) risk level response for each item. Do not use “Y” or “N” as your response options.

RISK LEVELS				RISK AREAS
High	Med	Low	NA	
				Psychological Risk – mental stress and/or emotional distress
X				Subjects are to reflect upon their own behavior, values, relationships, or person in such a way that they are <i>likely to be affected</i> emotionally or psychologically over the short and/or long term.
			X	Subjects will reveal <i>highly personal information</i> in areas such as significant relationships, trauma, sexuality, potentially immoral, unethical, or illegal behavior.
			X	Subjects will give opinions or viewpoints on <i>highly charged issues</i> including but not limited to political, emotional, cultural, spiritual, or psychological matters.
	X			Subjects are to reflect upon their own behavior, values, relationships, or person in such a way that <i>might result</i> in anxiety, regrets, concerns, afterthoughts, or reactions after the procedure is completed.
	X			Subjects will reveal <i>generally accepted personal information</i> regarding individual viewpoints, background, behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs.
			X	Subjects will give opinions or viewpoints on <i>sensitive matters</i> including but not limited to political, emotional, cultural, spiritual, or psychological matters.
		X		Subjects are to give <i>basic identifying information</i> such as age, gender, ethnicity, and other general questions regarding non-personal information.
		X		Subjects will give opinions or viewpoints on <i>common-place matters</i> such as locality, general trends, or other benign topics.
1	2	3	3	<i>Total the number of responses in each column for this area and enter here.</i>
				Sociological Risk – relational stress and/or positional distress
			X	Subjects may experience immediate and/or long-term employment, political, legal, economic, and/or social consequences as a result of participating in the study.
	X			Subjects are required to reflect upon their own behavior, values, relationships, or person in such a way that <i>might result</i> in anxiety or concern regarding themselves in relationship to other persons and/or social groups.
		X		Subjects are to give opinions or viewpoints on <i>common-place social relationships</i> such as community characteristics, census-type data, general trends, or other benign topics.
0	1	1	1	<i>Total the number of responses in each column for this area and enter here.</i>
				Physiological Risk – bodily harm to self and/or bodily harm to others
			X	Subjects <i>may experience or be exposed to bodily harm</i> as a result of the research and/or research methodology.
			X	Subjects <i>may experience or be exposed to bodily harm</i> as a result of participating in the gathering of data, such as entering high risk environments.
			X	The subject <i>may become tired or weakened physically or mentally</i> as a result of the research and/or research methodology.
		X		The subject <i>may become impatient</i> as a result of the time involved in the completion of the research and/or research methodology.
			X	The subject <i>may become impatient</i> as a result of environmental conditions endured in the completion of the research and/or research methodology.
		1	4	<i>Total the number of responses in each column for this area and enter here.</i>

Lent and Holy Week 2021 Alone + Together

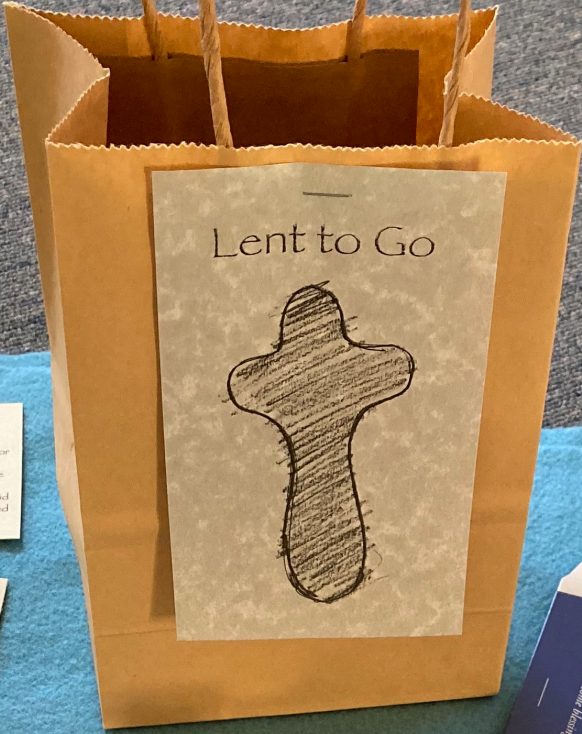
This has been year of a lot of time alone, and of new ways of being together. What has that been like for you? Solitude can offer both gifts and challenges. Jesus experienced times of solitary prayer as both blessing and affliction. And he sometimes found the near-constant company of the disciples hard, when they didn't understand or share his purpose. As we prepare for Holy Week, remembering Christ's death and resurrection, we'll think about what it means to be alone, the times when it is a burden and the times when it is a balm.

The Wondering Together project

This Lent we invite everyone to explore a traditional Christian practice: taking time in the evening to reflect on the day that has passed. Some of us will have spent most of the day by ourselves, and some of us have been with just a few members of our family. Whether we are alone or together, we can gather as a community by sharing this simple daily practice. This is not about feeling guilty over things left undone, or about resolving to do better tomorrow, but about approaching our time with gratitude for gifts received, and awareness of when we depended on God and those around us.

So set aside ten minutes each day, with your companions at home, whether that is with loved ones around the dinner table, or over the phone, or by yourself in a comfortable chair, perhaps with an animal friend or with cherished memories. If you like, light a candle as you consider the four questions each day. If you get caught up in one question, and don't get to the others that day, that's ok. At the close of the time, give thanks for God, who is always present with us whenever we ask.

This project comes to us from the doctoral work of Sally Thomas, one of those who originally brought Godly Play to St. Stephen's. You can read more about it at <https://sites.google.com/view/wonderingtogetherproject/home>.



*Opening ritual
perhaps lighting a candle*
As we ask these questions, we look for moments of grace. When were we comforted, or inspired? When did we discover something new, make a connection, or say goodbye? When did Jesus come near us? When did we need his presence most?

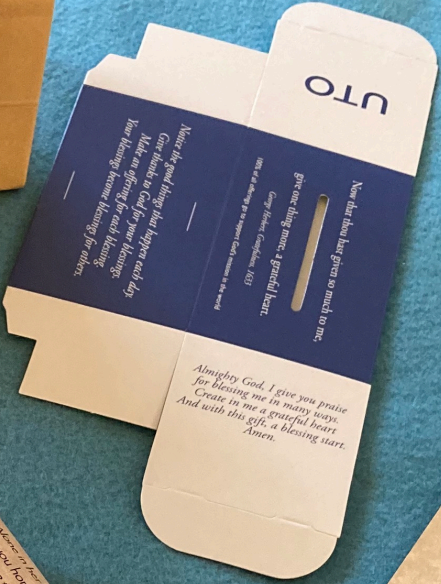
I wonder what part of today you liked best?

I wonder what part of today was the most important?

I wonder when you felt the most energy today?

I wonder what part of today you would have liked to leave out?

*Closing ritual
extinguishing your candle at the end*
For the gift of your presence this hour,
Holy One, we bless your Name. Amen.



Answer your questions or with kids and create a conversation with another adult - About anything - stop by for a Zoom chat with Meggie and Joan (links will go out in the Wednesday email)
Together again! Our Holy Week is held outside.
Not a Zoomer? Call her on the phone at 781-361-1083.

This has been year of a lot of times that been like for you? Solitude can be times of solitary prayer as both blessed purpose. As we prepare for Holy Week, we'll think about what it means to be alone when it is a balm.

The Wandering Together project
This Lent we invite everyone to explore a tradition evening to reflect on the day that has passed. So whether we are alone or together, we can gather as daily practice. This is not about approaching our to do better tomorrow, but about feeling guilty over the awareness of when we depended on God and those with loved ones around the dinner table, with your company light a candle as you consider the four questions each day. I question and don't get to the others that day, that's ok. At thanks for God, who is always present with us whenever we ask

This project comes to us from the doctoral work of Sally Thomas, one of those
Cody Fluitt, St. Stephen's. You can read more about it at
<https://www.google.com/view/wanderingtogetherproject/home>

Wondering Together Project - Electronic Consent Form for Adult Participants

Any information you provide is confidential.

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to better understand what changes a family notices when they make it a habit to come together every day (or almost every day) to share a bit about their experiences that day.

This research is being conducted by Sarah 'Sally' Thomas for purpose of a Doctor of Ministry research project and any subsequent scholarly writing. In this research, you will gather daily (or almost daily) as a family to hear about each other's day using four simple questions asked in the same order each time.

Any information you provide is confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

By your completion of the initial questionnaire ("Wondering Together Project – Demographic Information), participation in family interviews, and typing your name, email, and the date below, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

* Required

Yes, I
Consent

Your consent to participating is made by typing your name, your email, the date below and clicking SUBMIT.

1. Your Name *

2. Your Email *

Wondering Together Project - Electronic Consent Form for Minor Participants

Any information you provide is confidential.

Agreement to Participate

You are being asked to give permission for a minor or member of a vulnerable population under your legal supervision to participate in a study designed to better understand what changes a family notices when they make it a habit to come together every day (or almost every day) to share a bit about their experiences that day.

This research is being conducted by Sarah 'Sally' Thomas for the purpose of a Doctor of Ministry research project and any subsequent scholarly writing.

In this research, you will gather daily (or almost daily) as a family to hear about each other's day using four simple questions asked in the same order each time. Any information you provide is confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and the person for whom you are giving approval to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time.

By your completion of this demographic questionnaire, participation in family interviews, and typing your name, email, and the date below, you are giving informed consent for the designated minor or member of a vulnerable population to participate in this research if they desire.

* Required

Yes, I Consent on behalf of a minor child

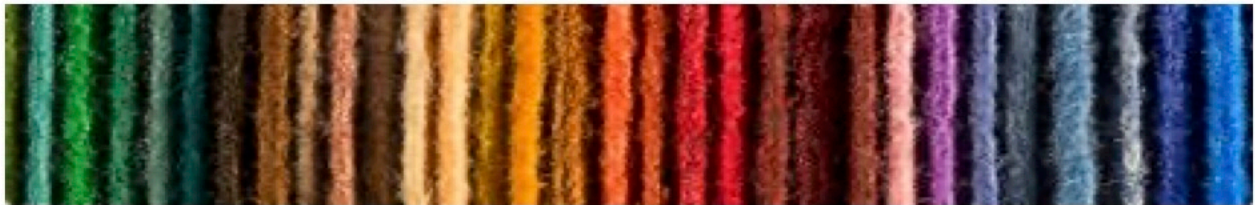
Your consent to participating is made by typing your name, your email, the date below and clicking SUBMIT.

1. Your Name *

2. Your Child's Name (please fill out one electronic form for each child) *

WONDERING TOGETHER

A PROJECT TO INVITE
YOUR FAMILY TO
SIMPLIFY AND RECONNECT THAT STARTS
WITH
“I WONDER...”



Why? Feel like your family rarely hears what’s going on in each other’s daily lives? (Psst... most families feel this way!)

Maybe... If we practice being together by sharing tiny stories each day then your family feels better prepared to talk about the trickier things (*think* driver’s license, hospitalization, winning the lottery...)

What? Using a couple of easy questions each day that begin with “*I wonder...*”, families are getting together and really hearing from each other. A little quality time in the midst of work, school, and screens.

Details ... I’m Sally Thomas and I am a doctoral candidate researching what happens when families take a few minutes each day at home, in the car, on the bus, walking the dog...to share these tiny stories and decrease that feeling of chaos. Want to know more?

Link [here](#) to our webpage!



Wondering Together Project - Demographic Information

Any information provided will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will a person's name be reported, or a person's name identified with their responses.

*** Required**

Email address *

Your email

Your Name *

Your answer

Your Contact Phone Number *

Your answer

Your Home Zip Code *



Your answer _____

Appendix G p. 2/3

Family Members Participating in Our Project *

Please list first names and ages of each member of your family who will be part of Wondering Together.

Your answer _____

Our Family is (check all that apply) *

American Indian/Alaskan Native

Asian or Pacific Islander

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latinx

White/Caucasian

Other: _____

When it comes to 'quality' time together, we ... (pick the best choice for today) *

Always have enough

Usually have enough

Sometimes have enough

Rarely have enough

Never have enough

Prefer not to answer



Prefer not to answer

Other: _____

When it comes to money, we ... (pick the best choice for today) *

Always have enough

Usually have enough

Sometimes have enough

Rarely have enough

Never have enough

Prefer not to answer

Other: _____

Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family:

Your answer

Submit

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google. [Report Abuse](#) - [Terms of Service](#) - [Privacy Policy](#)

Google Forms



Wondering Together Project Code Book

Ritual “R” (Pink)

- R-1: Process
- R-2: Value
- R-3: Physical object, touchstone, stone with questions imprinted
- R-4: Generative, Deepening
- R-5: Sustainable
- R-6: Ownership of
- R-7: Personalizing, adapting the practice
- R-8: Personalizing, adapting the questions
- R-9: Challenge with and /or by
- R-10: Fifth question, use of
- R-11: Fifth question, positive
- R-12: Fifth question, negative

Connection “C” (Blue)

- C-1: Self/Sense of Agency
- C-2: Family participating in Wondering Together Project
- C-3: Others in extended family, outside of WTP
- C-4: Community
- C-5: Beyond/Broader than local community
- C-6: Non-specific
- C-7: To Researcher or the product of the WTP research
- C-8: Work
- C-9: Disconnection from Partner
- C-10: Disconnection from family participating in WTP
- C-11: Scheduling issue between family and researcher
- C-12: Feeling disconnected, not pandemic related
- C-13: God
- C-14: Feeling disconnected due to pandemic

Impact “I” (Purple)

- I-1: New awareness
- I-2: Lasting
- I-3: Pandemic
- I-4: Time
- I-5: Work
- I-6: Personal
- I-7: Marital
- I-8: Familial
- I-9: Extra-familial

- I-10: Health
- I-11: Digital
- I-12: Parenting enhancement
- I-13: Parenting Challenge
- I-14: Affirming experience without significant novel impact

Research Question/Thesis Question “Q” (Red)

- Q-1: Positive
- Q-2: Negative
- Q-3: Neutral
- Q-4: Unsure
- Q-5: Time will tell/to be determined in time

Listening & Dialogue “L” (Orange)

- L-1: Self
- L-2: Family

Family Portraits

This appendix is a compendium of profiles of each of the families who participated in the Wondering Together Project (WTP.) Here you will find demographic information as volunteered by an adult member of each family along with pertinent dates and some information that might be helpful as you read the data analysis in Chapter 4.

Because the architecture of the practice of wondering together is inspired by the Godly Play® Sacred Story wondering questions, I have noted any familiarity the family may have with Godly Play® to the best of my knowledge. Because this research design was careful not to comingle expressly sacred terms into conversations unless invited by families, there are many for whom I have no specific information on their belief systems or worship practices. This was an intentional choice on my part to underscore that this research was not evangelical in nature. Future research would likely benefit from a demographic question regarding family spirituality practices.

I close each family portrait with a few personalized observations to assist you in getting a small glimpse of the families that were involved. If a researcher is called to be as neutral as possible, I have failed for I came to love each of these families. I love them because they were willing to try this thing, I love them because they were honest as they related their experience with it, and I love them because they were amazing and fragile. And even though we did not talk specifically about God, each of these interactions are a reminder of how something bigger than ourselves is present as witness and comforter. I believe you will see what I mean. Read on!

The Cobalt Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Ms. Cobalt (70)
 - Mr. Cobalt (82)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Midwest, urban
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we have time but we just haven't made it 'quality time'!
- When it comes to money, we usually have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: (nothing added)

Cohort Subcategories

- The Cobalts are one of four participating families without children (under 18 years) at home. (Others are Rose Gold, Turquoise, and White)
- The Cobalts are one of two participating families with adult children. (Other is Turquoise.)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Ms. Cobalt – direct experience
- Mr. Cobalt – indirect experience

Connection/s to Researcher: Ms. Cobalt has been a professional colleague and friend

- Ms. Cobalt expressed interest in being alerted when research opened up and I contacted her in January 2021 to that end.
- Currently a volunteer Sunday school in her retirement, Ms. Cobalt has used the tenets of the WTP to offer the ritual for families at her church. Those families are not enrolled in this research cohort.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Ms. Cobalt
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.16.21
 - Initial Family by telephone 1.17.21
 - Check In after Week #1 1.24.21 (Zoom)
 - Check In after Week #2 1.31.21 (Zoom)
 - Check In after Week #3 2.7.21 (Zoom)

- Closing Family Zoom 2.14.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial Phone Interview and subsequent Zoom interviews with Mr. and Ms. Cobalt found them sitting next to one another on a family couch while I was seated at my desk in my home office.
 - Mr. Cobalt is hard of hearing so there were moments where we recalibrated volume or repeated questions for maximal clarity of conversation.
 - Unable to record initial meeting as it was done by phone.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - During Week #1 interview, the Cobalts laughingly recalled a time several decades ago when they sought marital therapy. Apparently, they discovered that the conversation they had in the waiting room was so rich compared to their therapy experience, and they elected to forego therapy. They reported that their time in the Wondering Project recalled that time.
 - What about their code name? Ms. Cobalt has a beloved childhood association with the color which I have heard her describe previously.
 - Ms. Cobalt was well-acquainted with the four original wondering questions as amended from the Godly Play® Sacred Story tradition and was enthusiastic about the additional Fifth Question.

The Cyan Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Mom Cyan (51)
 - Daughter Cyan (10)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Missouri, urban
- Our Family is: Black or African American
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we sometimes have enough.
- When it comes to money, we sometimes have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: “Separated mother of one child, daughter is close to both sides of the family”

Cohort Subcategories:

- The Cyans are one of eight participating families with children under 18 living at home. (The others are the Green, Light Blue, Lime Green, Mr. Beast, Pink, Teal, Yellow Families)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Mom Cyan – direct experience
- Daughter Cyan – direct experience

Connection/s to Researcher: Yes. Prior shared church community.

- Mom responded to an email invitation from a staff member at the family’s current church.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Mom Cyan
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line: 2.10.21
 - Initial Family Zoom: 2.13.21
 - Check In after Week #1: None. Family did not come to scheduled Zoom on 2.20.21 and did not reschedule after I made two attempts.
 - Check In after Week #2: None
 - Check In after Week #3: None
 - Closing Family Zoom: None
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial Zoom interview with Mom Cyan and Daughter Cyan at the family table in their home while I was seated at my desk in my home office.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - This is the only family that began the Wondering Together Project but did not complete it. To avoid any implicit sense of pressure or coercion, it was my practice with participants and those who inquired about joining the research never to send more than two messages by text or email as follow-up.
 - My last text message with Mom Cyan was on March 3, 2021 wherein she would be back in touch. I did not hear from her after that.
 - Our Initial Interview was 22 min., 51 sec. and quite joyful as we were reconnecting after more than a year. Looking back and reviewing the transcription, I saw no hint that they would not continue in the research.
 - What about their code name? Daughter Cyan chose it and Mom Cyan said, “I’m going to have to look that one up.”

The Green Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Mom Green (48)
 - Dad Green (46)
 - Elder Daughter Green (18)
 - Younger Daughter Green (14)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Missouri, urban
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we usually have enough.
- When it comes to money, we always have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: (nothing written)

Cohort Subcategories

- The Greens are one of eight participating families with child/ren under 18 living at home. (The others are the Cyan, Light Blue, Lime Green, Mr. Beast, Pink, Teal, Yellow Families)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Mom Green – direct experience
- Dad Green – indirect experience
- Elder Daughter Green – direct experience
- Younger Daughter Green – direct experience

Connection/s to Researcher: Yes. Prior shared church community.

- Mom has been a thought partner in the conception of the Wondering Together Project and forwarded my WTP introductory email to others in her circle.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Mom Green
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.15.21
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.17.21
 - Check In after Week #1 1.24.21 (email with Mom Green)
 - Check In after Week #2 1.30.21 (email with Mom Green)

- Check In after Week #3 2.7.21 (email with Mom Green)
- Closing Family Zoom 2.14.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial and Closing Zoom interviews with family found them together on or near the family couch and with occasional (large and sweet) dog sightings while I was seated at my desk in my home office.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - I know the members of this family as our families lived in the same city and we attended the same church. It was a pleasure to reconnect.
 - This family had a ritual of checking in around the dinner table together prior to the WTP which made them unique. I know of no other families who came into the research with a prior family practice in place akin to the WTP.
 - What about their code name? Green was chosen by family consensus and our Initial Interview, but they did not share a reason as to why.
 - Anecdotally, Elder Daughter Green plays a role in her church's youth group leadership and has used the wondering questions as a 'check-in' practice.

The Light Blue Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Mom Light Blue (41)
 - Dad Light Blue (42)
 - Son Light Blue (5)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Missouri, suburban
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we sometimes have enough.
- When it comes to money, we usually have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family:
 - “We think that even though we are home together through the pandemic, it doesn't seem like we communicate really well or deeply, but that our connection does come during bedtime and in the stillness of the evening—it has become our favorite time of day.”

Cohort Subcategories:

- The Light Blues are one of eight participating families with children under 18 living at home. (The others are the Cyan, Green, Lime Green, Mr. Beast, Pink, Teal, Yellow Families)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Mom Light Blue – direct experience
- Dad Light Blue – direct experience
- Son Light Blue – direct experience

Connection/s to Researcher: Yes. Prior shared church community.

- Mom responded to an email invitation from a staff member at the family's current church.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Mom Light Blue
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line: 1.26.21
 - Initial Family Zoom: 1.29.21
 - Check In Week #1: 2.5.21 (Zoom with Mom Light Blue)
 - Check In Week #2: 2.12.21 (Zoom with Mom Light Blue)
 - Check In Week #3: 2.19.21 (Zoom with Mom Light Blue)
 - Closing Family Zoom: 2.28.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial Zoom interview with family at Mom's workspace at home while I was seated at my desk in my home office.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - Every family that I encountered in the WTP was precious. I especially appreciate how clear these parents were in wanting to acknowledge and change some family patterns from their own childhoods around communication. Mom Light Blue shared evidence of a lot of personal work to that end.
 - At Week #2, my Field Notes reflect some awe that Mom Light Blue was willing to spend 29 min, 3 sec. on a Friday afternoon! In later reflection, I also considered whether these weekly visits may have also offered a kind of pandemic parental support. This unforeseen insight makes me curious about what weekly conversations, even if remote, might offer to parents using an open and active listening style, in the spirit of spiritual direction.
 - What about their code name? 5-year-old Son Light Blue chose the code name as his favorite color is blue.

The Lime Green Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Mom Lime Green (47)
 - Daughter Lime Green (12)
 - Son Lime Green (9)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Northern California, city
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we usually have enough.
- When it comes to money, we always have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: (nothing noted)

Cohort Subcategories

- The Lime Greens are one of eight participating families with child/ren under 18 living at home. (The others are the Cyan, Green, Light Blue, Mr. Beast, Pink, Teal, Yellow Families)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Mom Lime Green – unknown at time of research.
- Daughter Lime Green – unknown at time of research.
- Son Lime Green – unknown at time of research.

In reviewing this Family Portrait in its draft form, Mom Lime Green emailed the following: “We are all familiar with Godly Play® (I don't remember being asked about that, but I see it listed as an unknown). The kids have participated in Godly Play® at church for about 8 years, and they both also attended Montessori preschool (which may or may not be relevant...but I know Godly Play® is Montessori-inspired.)”²⁷⁵

Connection/s to Researcher: No prior

- Mom responded to an email invitation forwarded by a former professional colleague of mine to whom I had sent the general email inviting people to share the WTP during the recruitment period. This family responded to that forwarded email invitation. There is no prior connection of any kind of which I am aware.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Mom Lime Green
- Dates of Interactions:

²⁷⁵ Email received from Mom Lime Green on May 30, 2021.

- Registration on-line 1.25.21
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.29.21
 - Check In after Week #1 2.12.21 (email with Mom)
 - Check In after Week #2 2.26.21 (email with Mom)
 - Check In after Week #3 3.12.21 (email with Mom)
 - Closing Family Zoom 4.7.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial Zoom interview was with the family who I found gathered close together in their kitchen while I was seated at my desk in my home office.
 - Closing meeting was by telephone (speakerphone) while family was on vacation.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - This was the only participating family of this cohort where the children were not living in this home continuously. The Lime Green children alternate between Mom Lime Green and their father. For that reason, they had the longest research period as we met approximately every other week. I asked if it was a challenge to start and stop the practice due to these arrangements:
 - **Me:** ...because you all kind of had a pattern that needed to stop the wondering, start the wondering, stop the wondering, start the wondering. Did you kind of figure out a way that was helpful to kind of drop back into it when you were back together or is that no problem at all?
 - **Mom Lime Green:** Um, no, it was our dinnertime routine so we just you know just yeah picked it right back.²⁷⁶
 - What about their code name? I do not know precisely why they chose this code name, but they reached consensus quickly.
 - Because I communicated with Mom Lime Green by email in the middle weeks, I really only met this family visually at the initial Zoom. I am so grateful that I did as I could, at least, picture them on our closing interview by telephone – although I did have to clarify which child was speaking once or twice because I could not differentiate their voices!

The Mr. Beast Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Mom (43)

²⁷⁶ Lime Green Closing Interview by telephone, April 7, 2021, 10 min., 16 sec.

- Dad (49)
- Son (10)
- Zip Code indicates Location: New York State, urban
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we sometimes have enough.
- When it comes to money, we always have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: *“We are a very creative family. I am an avid gardener and photographer, my husband is a computer programmer and hosts a 3-D art and modeling website, and our son is a mix of us both- but tends to be drawn to computer programming the most though I try to keep him well rounded. We are all drawn to working constantly. Living in the city has been tough during the pandemic and even though we are technically in the same house often we are usually in our different silos working on our own projects. I'm looking forward to getting out of our bubbles.”* (Mom)

Cohort Subcategories

- The Mr. Beasts are one of eight participating families with child/ren under 18 living at home. (The others are the Cyan, Green, Light Blue, Lime Green, Pink, Teal, Yellow Families)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Mom Beast – Unknown
- Dad Beast – Unknown
- Son Mr. Beast - Unknown

Connection/s to Researcher: No prior

- Mom works with a volunteer colleague of mine to whom I had sent the general email inviting people to share the WTP during the recruitment period. This family responded to that forwarded email invitation. There is no prior connection of any kind of which I am aware.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Mom
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.21.21
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.22.21
 - Check In after Week #1 1.29.21 (email with Mom)
 - Check In after Week #2 2.6.21 (email with Mom)
 - Check In after Week #3 2.14.21 (email with Mom)
 - Closing Family Zoom 2.19.21

- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial and Closing Zoom interviews with family found them together on or near the family couch and with occasional (sweet) dog sightings while I was seated at my desk in my home office.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - During our initial interview, Dad noticed a painting in my office that echoed one that was visible in their home. As Mom noted in her demographic comment, they are creative people and Dad's grandfather was an artist of recognizable notoriety.
 - What about their code name? While I was not aware at the time and did not ask the family to confirm, "Mr. Beast" is a YouTube personality of renown and has been nominated for a Kid's Choice Award for favorite Male Social Star.
 - At the start of our closing interview, Mom said casually, "Do you know what we call you?" Before I could guess, Son answered "Wonder Woman!" with superhero enthusiasm. I held up my wrists to display my imaginary golden Wonder Woman bracelets and we embarked on our final conversation.

The Pink Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Mom Pink (not noted)
 - Dad Pink (42)
 - Daughter Pink (5)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Massachusetts, suburban
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we usually have enough.
- When it comes to money, we sometimes have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: (nothing noted)

Cohort Subcategories

- The Pinks are one of eight participating families with child/ren under 18 living at home. (The others are the Cyan, Green, Light Blue, Lime Green, Mr. Beast, Teal, Yellow Families)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

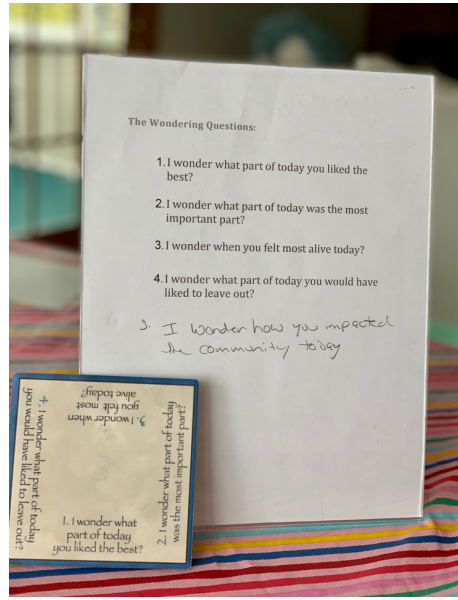
- Mom Pink – no formal experience
- Dad Pink – no formal experience
- Daughter Pink - no formal experience

Connection/s to Researcher: Mr. Pink is my spouse's nephew

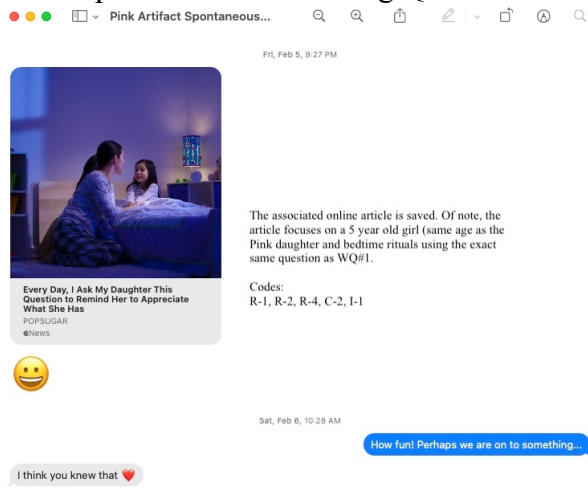
- This family was aware of the WTP while it was in development in 2020 and encouraged me to reach out when we started enrolling, they were the second family to enroll.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Mom Pink
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.11.21
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.16.21
 - Check In after Week #1 1.24.21 (email with Mom)
 - Check In after Week #2 1.30.21 (email with Mom)
 - Check In after Week #3 2.7.21 (email with Mom)
 - Closing Family Zoom 2.14.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial and Closing Zoom interviews with this family found them together at a table in what appeared to be their family room while I was seated at my desk in my home office.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - During our initial interview, the family shared that they had begun the practice a few days earlier. Dad Pink was on-call for work so was not present the entire time.
 - As mentioned, I am part of the Pink's extended family, generally getting to visit with them for a few days in the summer. It was a treat to encounter them in this new way.
 - What about their code name? Pink is Daughter Pink's favorite color. It was a quick decision!
 - Mom sent two spontaneous and interesting artifacts.
 - (Sent 2.4.21) The family had chosen to add an additional question: "I wonder how you impacted your community today?"



- (Sent 2.5.21) A link to an article that focused on asking a child every night the same questions as Wondering Question #1.²⁷⁷



²⁷⁷ Cinelli, Elisa. February 5, 2021. <https://www.popsugar.com/family/how-i-teach-my-child-to-appreciate-what-she-has-48113676>

The Rose Gold Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Ms. Rose Gold (not given)
 - Mr. Rose Gold (29)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Illinois, urban
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we usually have enough.
- When it comes to money, we usually have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: (nothing noted)

Cohort Subcategories

- The Rose Golds are one of four participating families without children (under 18 years) at home. (Others are Cobalt Blue, Turquoise, and White)
- The Rose Golds are one of two participating families without children. (Other is White.)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Ms. Rose Gold – unknown
- Mr. Rose Gold – unknown

Connection/s to Researcher: By association.

- This couple was invited into the WTP by Ms. White who is my daughter. I have met Ms. Rose Gold once socially but not Mr. Rose Gold.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Ms. Rose Gold
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.18.21
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.21.21
 - Check In after Week #1 1.28.21 (Zoom with both)
 - Check In after Week #2 2.4.21 (Zoom with both)
 - Check In after Week #3 2.11.21 (email with Ms. Rose Gold on 2.11.21 and Mr. Rose Gold on 2.18.21)

- Closing Family Zoom 2.18.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Zoom interviews with family found them together on or near the family couch and with occasional (sweet) dog sightings while I was seated at my desk in my home office.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - During our initial interview and Week #1, I was charmed by their sweet dog who is named after a television character of 20 years ago who was complex and funny. Their dog seemed to be a wonder and was certainly beloved. Week #1 found this dog with a severe eye infection which the Rose Golds were treating with sincere care while seeming to take it in stride. As I share in Chapter 4, the Rose Gold's ritual included holding hands together as they began the WTP, including their dog's paw.
 - What about their code name? When asked, Mr. Rose Gold picked the name quickly and Ms. Rose Gold agreed. I am unaware of the connection they have to this color.
 - The Rose Golds moved me with their devotion to one another and sincere desire to expand their communication tools, including using wondering for the month of the research period. They are quite a family.

The Teal Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Mom Teal (none given)
 - Eldest Daughter Teal (19)
 - Younger Daughter Teal (12)
 - Son Teal (7)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Maine, small town
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we sometimes have enough.
- When it comes to money, we sometimes have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: (nothing noted)

Cohort Subcategories:

- The Teals are one of eight participating families with children under 18 living at home. (The others are the Cyan, Green, Light Blue, Lime Green, Mr. Beast, Pink, Yellow Families)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Mom Teal – unknown
- Eldest Daughter Teal - unknown
- Younger Daughter Teal - unknown
- Son Teal – unknown

Connection/s to Researcher: Yes

- Mom Teal had worked as a caregiver for my mother in-law and father in-law for several summers from 2016-2018.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Mom Teal
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.10.21
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.18.21
 - Zoom Check In Week #1 1.25.21 (with Mom)
 - Zoom Check In Week #2 2.1.21 (with Mom and Daughters Teal)
 - Zoom Check In Week #3 2.9.21 (with Mom)
 - Closing Family Zoom 2.16.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial and Closing Zoom interviews with family found them together in their kitchen while I was seated at my desk in my home office. Week #1, Mom Teal was at her work desk. Week #2, Mom Teal was with Daughters Teal in their car, Week #3 Mom Teal was at home by herself.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - Dad Teal is an engaged spouse and parent but was not interested in participating in this research project.
 - What about their code name? Son Teal was playing in the yard for our initial meeting, so it was Daughters and Mom Teal who agreed on the family code name.
 - I made no provisions in this research to delve into personal details, especially of children given the Human Subject research considerations. In conversations during the research period, Mom Teal shared that each of the three children had challenges, including learning and emotional ones. One child was ill

during the research period but that did not preclude the family from participating. Each of the three children was brought into this family by love, not by birth.

The Turquoise Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Ms. Turquoise (63)
 - Mr. Turquoise (70)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Indiana, urban
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we sometimes have enough. (Ms. Turquoise)
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we sometimes have enough. (Mr. Turquoise)
- When it comes to money, we usually have enough. (Ms. Teal)
- When it comes to money, we sometimes have enough. (Mr. Teal)
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family:
 - “Our adult daughter, [name of daughter] (31), suffers from major depression/anxiety/sleep disorder, and still lives with us, which can be a source of stress, though she is currently working hard to get better.” (Ms. Turquoise)

Cohort Subcategories

- The Turquoises are one of four participating families without children (under 18 years) at home. (Others are Cobalt Blue, Rose Gold, and White)
- The Turquoises are one of two participating families with adult children. (Other is Cobalt Blue.)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Ms. Turquoise – direct experience
- Mr. Turquoise – indirect experience

Connection/s to Researcher: No prior

- Ms. Turquoise works with of a volunteer colleague of mine (Ms. Cobalt) to whom I had sent the general email inviting people to share the WTP during the recruitment period. This family responded to that forwarded email invitation. There is no prior connection of any kind of which I am aware.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Ms. Turquoise
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.18.21 (Ms. Turquoise)
 - Registration on-line 1.23.21 (Mr. Turquoise)
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.25.21
 - Zoom Check In Week #1 2.1.21
 - Zoom Check In Week #2 2.9.21
 - Zoom Check In Week #3 2.16.21
 - Closing Family Zoom 3.22.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - All interviews were by Zoom with Mr. and Ms. Turquoise gathered at a table at home while I was seated at my desk in my home office. They have two cats, one of whom I met via Zoom and one who was reported to be too shy for Zoom!
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - As Ms. Turquoise noted on with her demographic information, this couple has an adult daughter living at home who did not sign consent to be part of the research. From her parents reporting, I was aware that their daughter was at our interviews several times but out of view of the camera. The Turquoises also reported that she took an interest in the WTP.
 - “[W]e asked the questions and she sat with us and actually contributed some things. I think she's really enjoyed it. It has been a very nice way for the three of us to connect...Even if she doesn't say anything, she likes to sit with us while we do our questions.”²⁷⁸
 - “She wants to be, she always asks me almost every night. ‘Have you done your questions yet?’ And if I say, yes, we've already done them. She said, ‘Oh I wanted to do it too.’”²⁷⁹
 - What about their code name? The Turquoise’s adult daughter helped with the selection of the code name at our Initial Interview although I did not see her.
 - Ms. Turquoise is a music teacher and Mr. Turquoise reported that he was recently retired from the field of engineering.

²⁷⁸ Ms. Turquoise, Turquoise Interview Week #2, February 9, 2021, 0 min., 55 sec.

²⁷⁹ Ms. Turquoise, Turquoise Interview, Week #3, February 16, 2021, 3 min., 38 sec.

- COVID Impact:
 - The Turquoises expressed issues related to COVID impact more than any other family as evidenced in Appendix Q (Occurrence of COVID Codes by Family).
 - Ms. Turquoise was ill with COVID towards the end of the research period. According to her, she was symptomatic two days after our Week #3 Interview and was ill at home for 10 days and then hospitalized for 10 days. When she was feeling ready, we scheduled our Final Interview.
 - Mr. Turquoise shared that being newly retired at the onset of the pandemic was quite challenging. At the Final Interview, he offered that (per wondering question #4), “I think I’d like to leave out the entire last year.”²⁸⁰

The White Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Ms. White (29)
 - Mr. White (34)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Illinois, urban
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we always have enough.
- When it comes to money, we usually have enough.
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family: (nothing added)

Cohort Subcategories

- The Whites are one of four participating families without children (under 18 years) at home. (Others are Cobalt, Rose Gold, Turquoise)
- The Whites are one of two families who are of childbearing age without children at home. (Other Rose Gold.)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Ms. White – direct experience
- Mr. White – no experience

²⁸⁰ Mr. Turquoise, Final Interview, March 22, 2021, 12 min., 48 sec.

Connection/s to Researcher: Ms. White is my daughter and Mr. White is my son-in-law.

- The Whites expressed interest in participating based on a single email invitation from me and were willing to be the initial family, aware that I would be refining procedures (voice recordings, Zoom meetings, etc.) After speaking with Eden faculty adjunct professor, Dr. Jeff Moore, I was clear that including the Whites' experience in the data set was appropriate and important. I then consulted statistician, Niesa Ryder, to perform analysis of the coded data to ensure that the integrity of the data set was not compromised with the decision to include kin in the research cohort.²⁸¹

Connection/s to Other's in the Cohort:

- Ms. White suggested the WTP to Ms. Rose Gold who reached out to me directly. The Rose Golds enrolled shortly thereafter.

Research Experience Timeline:

Primary Contact: Ms. White

- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.14.21
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.14.21
 - Zoom Check In after Week #1 1.21.21
 - Zoom Check In after Week #2 1.28.21
 - Zoom Check In after Week #3 2.4.21
 - Closing Family Zoom 2.11.21

Notes on Meeting Style and Place:

- Each interview with Mr. and Ms. White was via Zoom and found them together on or near the family couch with occasional visits from their dog while I was seated at my desk in my home office.

Researcher Reminiscences:

- During our initial interview, Mr. White focused in on the oft-used term in our first meeting: wonder. "Why the word 'wonder'? I know there's a reason. Just curious."²⁸² It was an important point of connection and we discussed wonder in some detail at that point. Ms. White had grown up in a milieu of wonder through her experience of Godly Play® on Sunday mornings at our church. In a later reflection, Ms. White indicated that this exchange in our first interview

²⁸¹ The Pink Family is the only other member of the research cohort with which I have familial ties. Mr. Pink is a second degree relative (my spouse's nephew) and Daughter Pink is a third degree relative (my spouse's great niece.)

²⁸² White Initial Interview, January 14, 2021 at 10 min., 59 sec.

around the value of the term ‘wonder’ was beneficial; she shared that ‘wonder’ felt invitational, intergenerational, and not value-laden.

- What about their code name? The “White’s” were the only family who did not pick their code name which was one example of their being “test-balloons’ in my research. I assigned that particular color as they had been recently married and I associated white with that ritual. At Week #2, I offered them the option to change their code color and they declined.
- Some evocative terms were lifted up by the White’s that appear ahead in the data analysis. I recognize that my close family members are quite likely to use descriptors that resonate for me. In Week #3, Ms. White observed that “it’s nice that you *keep the stakes sort of low*,” a reference to not feeling pressured to do the practice “right.”²⁸³ This was precisely the tone I was trying to set with research families. Ironically, two descriptive terms that I use to characterize a research finding were proffered by Mr. White, my son-in-law, rather than my daughter.
 - “Cadence” in regard to the rhythm found in the early practice.²⁸⁴
 - “Muddle” in regard to the challenges encountered in Week #3.²⁸⁵

The Yellow Family

Demographic Information from Participant/s: (gathered by Google Forms)

- Members:
 - Mom Yellow (none given)
 - Dad Yellow (35)
 - Twin Daughter Yellow (1)
 - Twin Son Yellow (1)
- Zip Code indicates Location: Maine, small town
- Our Family is: White/Caucasian
- When it comes to 'quality' time together, we usually have enough.
- When it comes to money, we always have enough and we sometimes have enough. (2 options chosen)
- Please add anything here that you want the researcher, Sally Thomas, to know about you and your family:
 - “We both come from good homes and have always been loved & nurtured. I love the idea of family story telling. Lastly, a big goal of 2021 has been less screen time and more reflection.” (Mom Yellow)

²⁸³ White Interview Week #3, February 4, 2021 at 15 min., 13 sec. Italics are mine.

²⁸⁴ White Interview Week #2, January 28, 2021 at 1 min., 38 sec.

²⁸⁵ White Interview Week #3, February 4, 2021 at 4 min., 26 sec.

Cohort Subcategories:

- The Yellow's are one of eight participating families with children under 18 living at home. (The others are the Cyan, Green, Light Blue, Lime Green, Mr. Beast, Pink, Teal, Families)

Godly Play® Familiarity:

- Mom Yellow – unknown
- Dad Yellow – unknown
- Twin Son Yellow – unlikely
- Twin Daughter Yellow - unlikely

Connection/s to Researcher: Yes

- Mom has been my dental hygienist since Fall, 2020. A conversation about my research proposal during a dental cleaning led to Mom Yellow wondering if they might know more in case they wanted to participate as a family. She responded to my email invitation. No dental interactions happened during the research period.

Research Experience Timeline:

- Primary Contact: Mom Yellow
- Dates of Interactions:
 - Registration on-line 1.21.21
 - Initial Family Zoom 1.24.21
 - Check In after Week #1 1.31.21 (email with Mom)
 - Check In after Week#2 2.7.21 (email with Mom)
 - Check In after Week #3 2.14.21 (email with Mom)
 - Closing Family Zoom 2.21.21
- Notes on Meeting Style and Place:
 - Initial and Closing Zoom interviews with family found them together managing to converse with me while their twins played. I was seated at my desk in my home office.
- Researcher Reminiscences:
 - While many families did their wondering together during dinnertime, the Yellow's took it to a different level. Mom and Dad Yellow often wondered together while they were feeding their twins dinner!
 - What about their code name? As far as I know, there was no significance to the color yellow when chosen by Mom Yellow at our Initial Interview.
 - The Yellows represented the briefest interviews and emails which is understandable with twin babies. Even in the brevity, I sensed the ritual of the WTP had staying power for their family. The Yellows took ownership of the

questions in a way that worked well for them, especially since they felt some redundancy in them. By the Final Interview, they had narrowed down to three total questions.

- “I think in general. I think we've done well with the, ‘what was the best part of your day?’ ‘What was the worst part?’ and then we added in ‘how are you feeling?’ which I like that one.”²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ Mom Yellow, Final Zoom Interview, February 21, 2021, 0 min., 33 sec.

Initial Interview Outline

May I record?

Confidentiality assured by coded answers

I am recording

Pick a color to identify your family

Have you had a chance to look at any of the materials?

Review the Practice:

Display the stone

Pick a place

Pick a time

Pick a signal

Noises silenced

Signal to one another

Deep breath

Ask the first question to one person.

Answers can be a word or a story.

The other family members just listen. We "hold" each other's story. Everyone gets to ask the first question.

Then the second, third, and fourth.

Signal to one another to close.

If possible make an eye connection with each other that says "I listened to you. Thank-you."

Recording conversation and keep in password protected file and then on a removable drive

Research complete after 4 weeks

Your completion date is: _____

Let's plan to Zoom to close on that date at what time: _____ -

I would like to check in once a week to answer questions and see how things are going. That is going to be a really helpful part. What work's best for a weekly check in? family members can take turns but we will just pick one way now)

Text, Email, Phone call, Video chat



From: Sally Thomas hisallythomas@gmail.com
Subject:
Date: April 17, 2021 at 1:17 PM
To:
Bcc: Week #1 Check In

Hello ++++++,

As promised, I am checking in on how Wondering Together is going for the “+++++++” after a week of wondering.

I welcome your thoughts in response to these quick questions and any other thoughts you have:

- Have you been able to do Wondering Together some/most/all days?
- Is there a time of day or place that you have settled into to Wonder Together?
- Type a few adjectives or phrases to describe how Wondering Together feels in your family?
- Are there any questions you have about the practice of Wondering Together that I might help with?

I have been thinking of you all and hope you are doing well in Covid-world.

Looking forward to hearing how things are going!

Thanks,
Sally

Sally Thomas
(she/her/hers)
Freeport, Maine
Candidate, Doctor of Ministry
Eden Seminary (St. Louis, MO)
207-805-4120
[The Wondering Together Project](#)



From: Sally Thomas
Subject: 2 week check in
Date

To:

It's been two weeks since you began Wondering Together and I am wondering (hmmmm) how things have changed in the past week. Here are a few questions to jog your thinking. All thoughts welcome!

- How are things going?
- What has changed in the wondering together that might be different/more challenging/better/interesting/... in the second week?
- If you were to describe the Wondering Together Project to someone outside your family, how might you describe it?
- Do all of you feel the same way?
- Have you changed the order of the questions or would you like to?

5th Question: There is an optional question that families may choose to add after two weeks of wondering together. (This is the only question change/add and it's completely optional!)

- "I wonder how you are feeling in this moment?"

I am so excited to hear back from you.

Thanks so much for participating! I am really grateful,
Sally

From: Sally Thomas hisallythomas@gmail.com
Subject: 3rd week check in
Date: April 17, 2021 at 1:19 PM
To:

ST

Hello ++++++,

The ++++ Family has now finished 3 weeks as members of the Wondering Together Project. Thank-you!

Would you take a moment to let me know how things are going?

- What changes have you noticed in the past week compared with the week before?
 - Is it easier, harder, different, depends on the day?
- Are there places of joy or frustration for certain members of your family?
- How have you changed things to try and make the practice of Wondering Together work better for you all?
- Did you start to use the additional "5th Question" ("I wonder how you are feeling?") If so, how is that going?

This time next week marks a month and is our time to connect with a final Zoom call. Is there a time that would work well for a 20 minute Zoom call on *****?

Thanks so much!

Hope you are well,
Sally

Sally Thomas
(she/her/hers)
Freeport, Maine
Candidate, Doctor of Ministry
Eden Seminary (St. Louis, MO)
207-805-4120
[The Wondering Together Project](#)

Closing Family Interview Rubric

Okay if I record?

Yay and Thanks!

Wonder about the past week.

I have three questions to look back on the whole month of Wondering Together.

First, I wonder what you have learned about yourselves and each other since taking on a month-long commitment like this?

Second, Will you keep wondering together? Why or why not?

I have one last question...

If a family adopts a habit of communal Examen, will the practice enhance their existential and spiritual lexicon?

Restated in the vernacular, "If a family checks in daily when things are 'normal,' will that make it easier to talk about the big stuff when things get rough?"

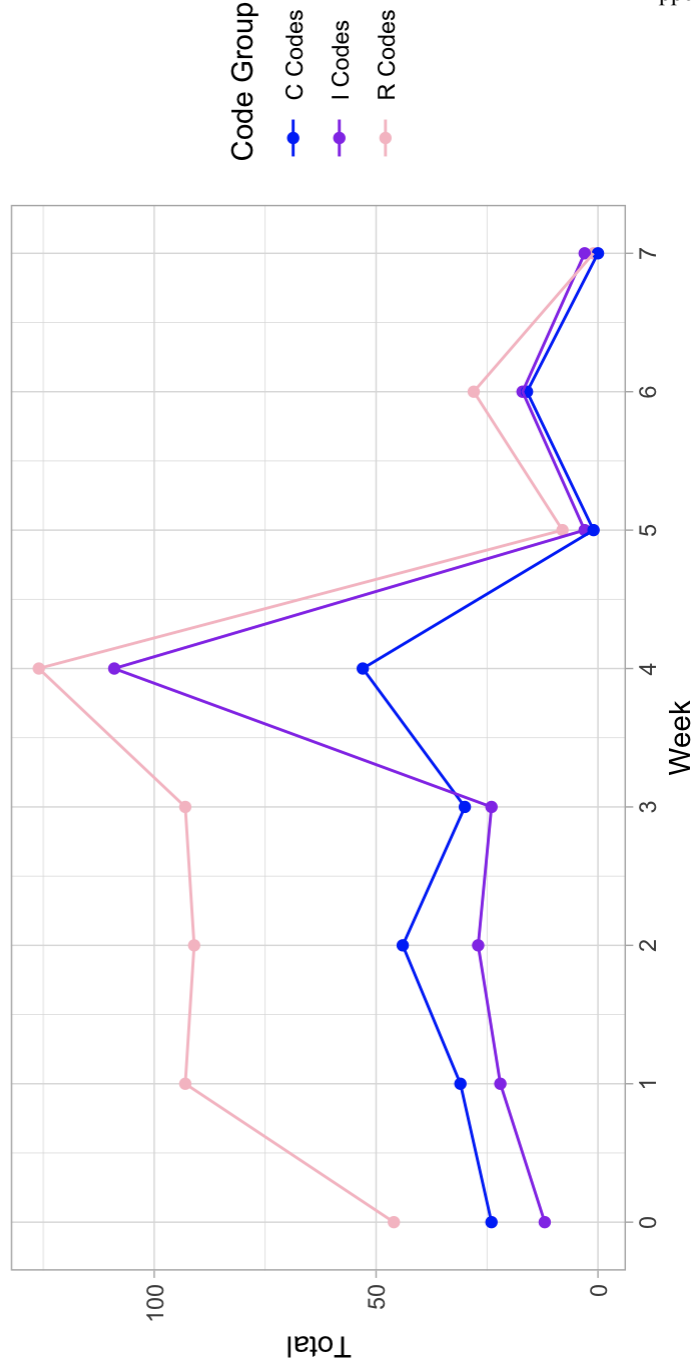
Take time in hearing any other feedback and expressing my deep thanks.

Connection, Impact, and Ritual Code Totals by Week

Connection: C-1 through C-14

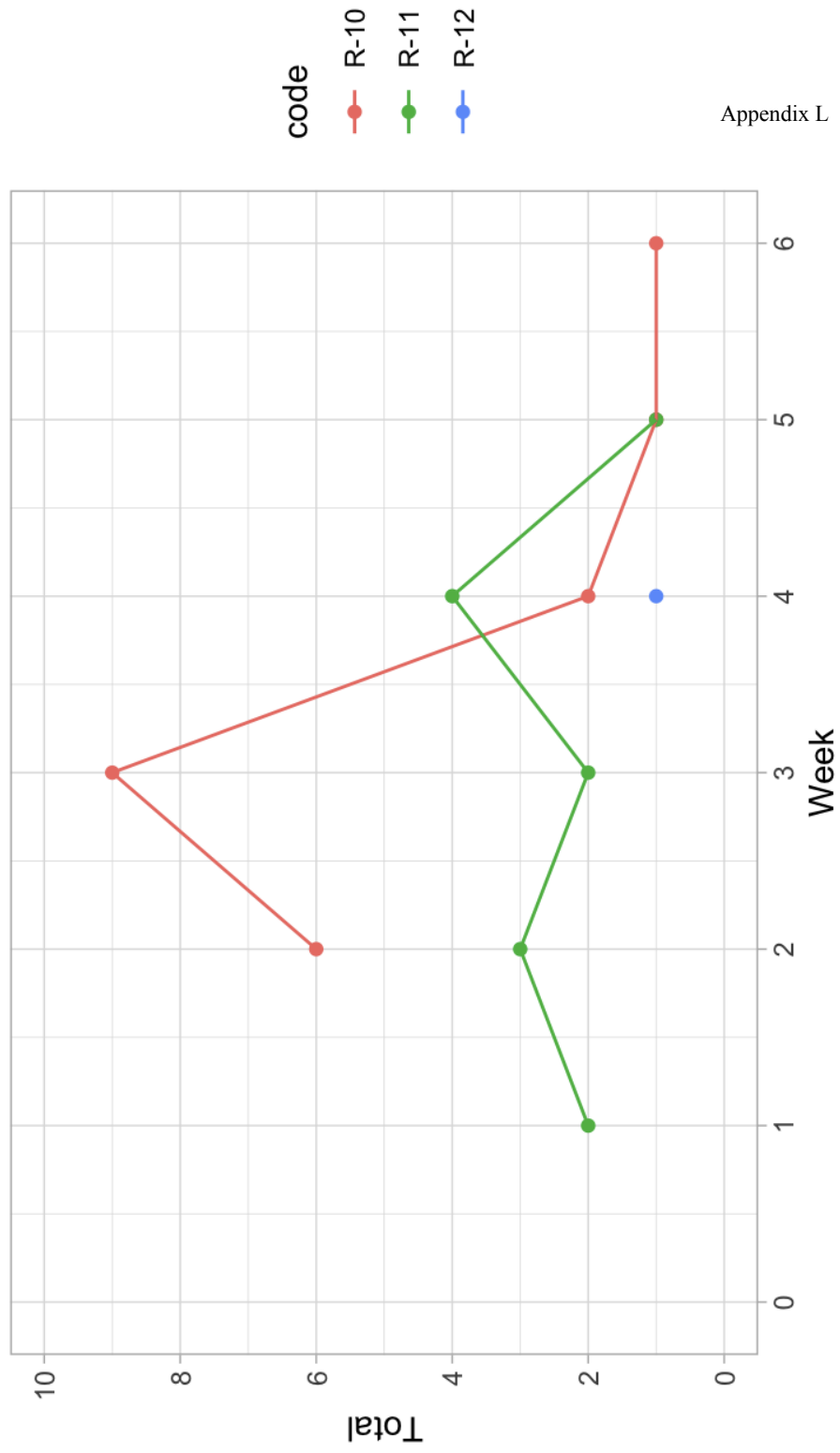
Impact: I-1 through I-14

Ritual: R-1 through R-12



Code Group
C Codes
I Codes
R Codes

Codes Related to Fifth Question by Week

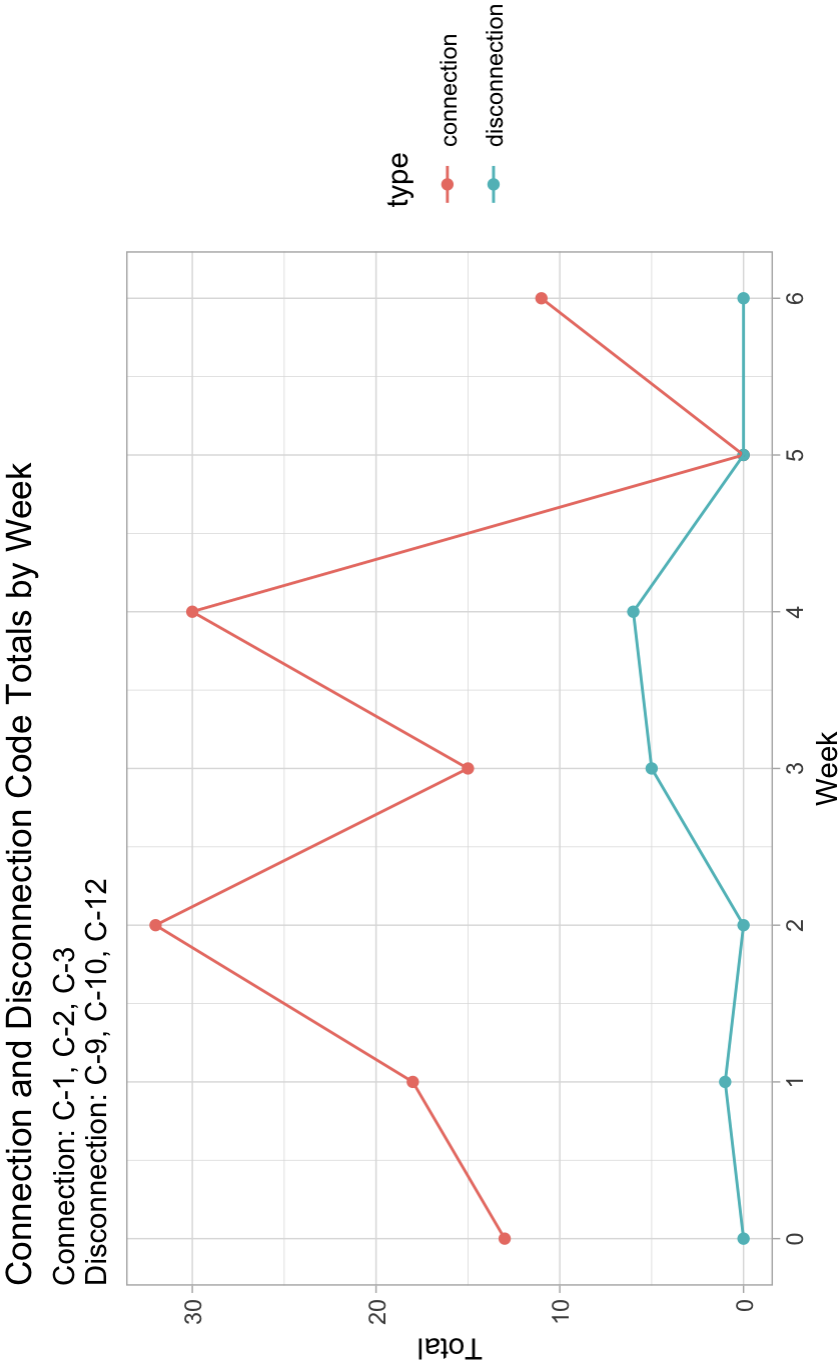


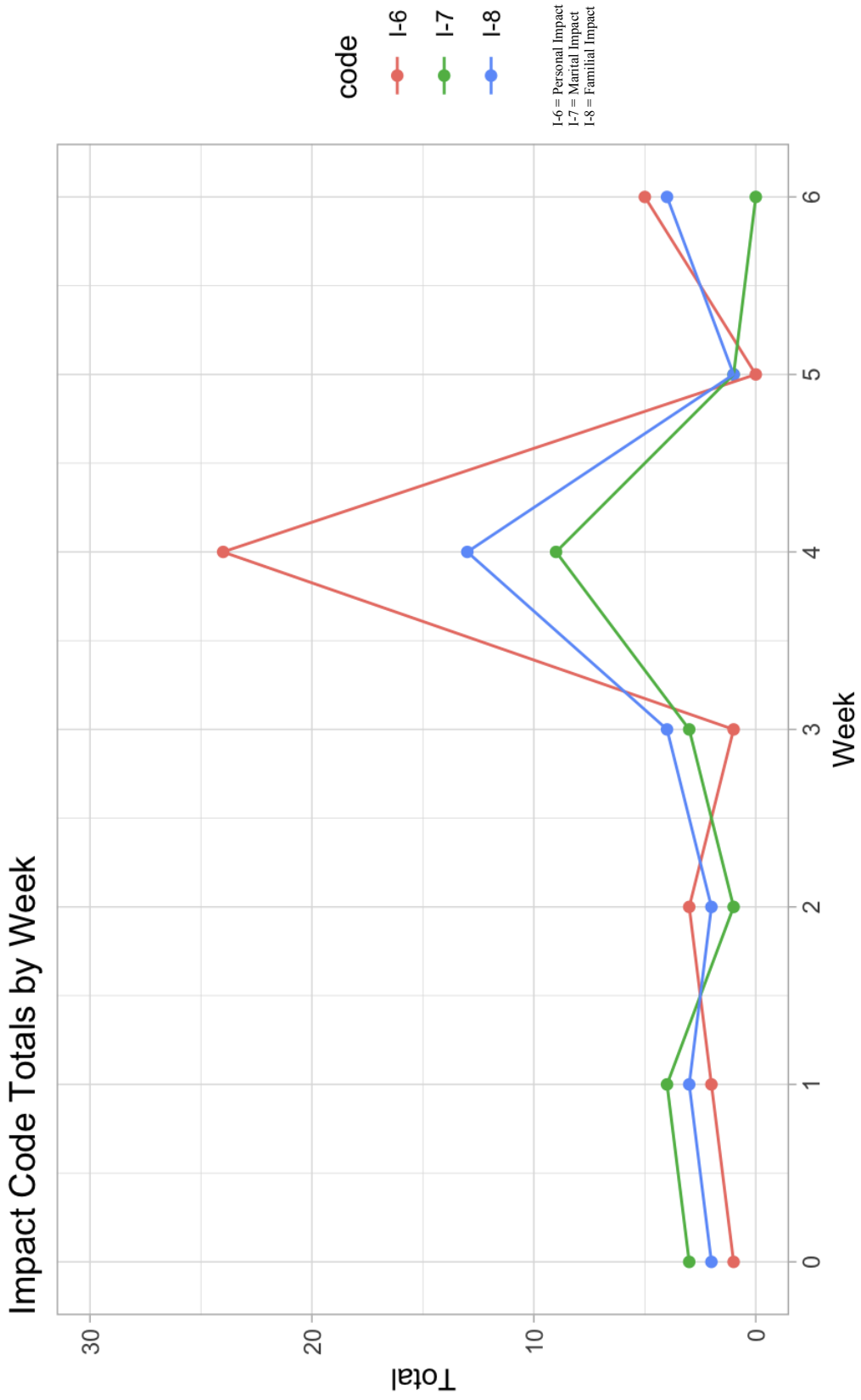
Appendix L

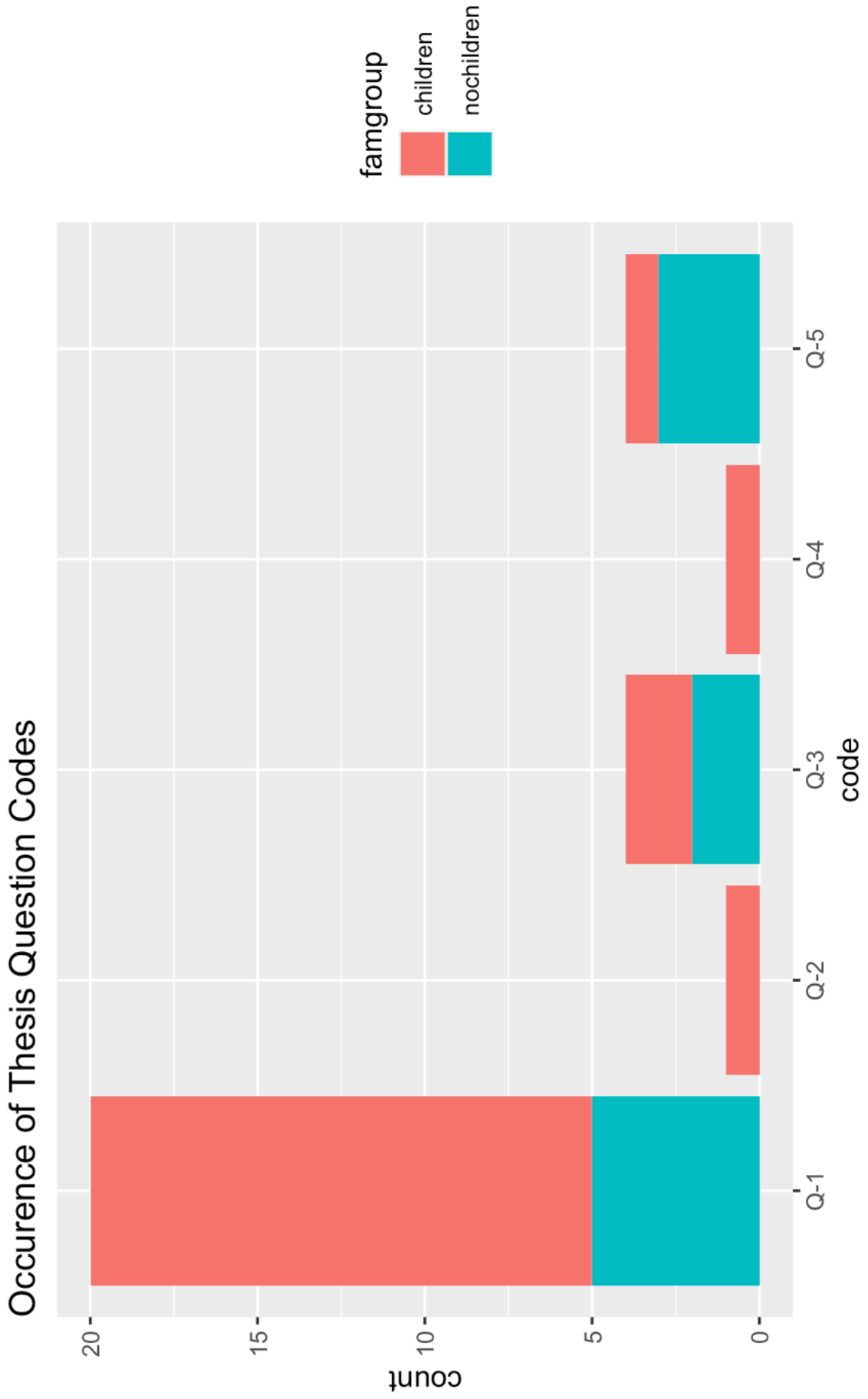
Incidence of “R-6” (= Ownership of Ritual Practice) Codes per family in Week #2 Interview. (Green and Turquoise Families had no R-6 codes in Week #2.)

family <chr>	total <int>
cobaltBlue	3
lightBlue	3
limeGreen	1
mrBeast	1
roseGold	7
teal	1
turquoise	3
white	4
yellow	3

9 rows

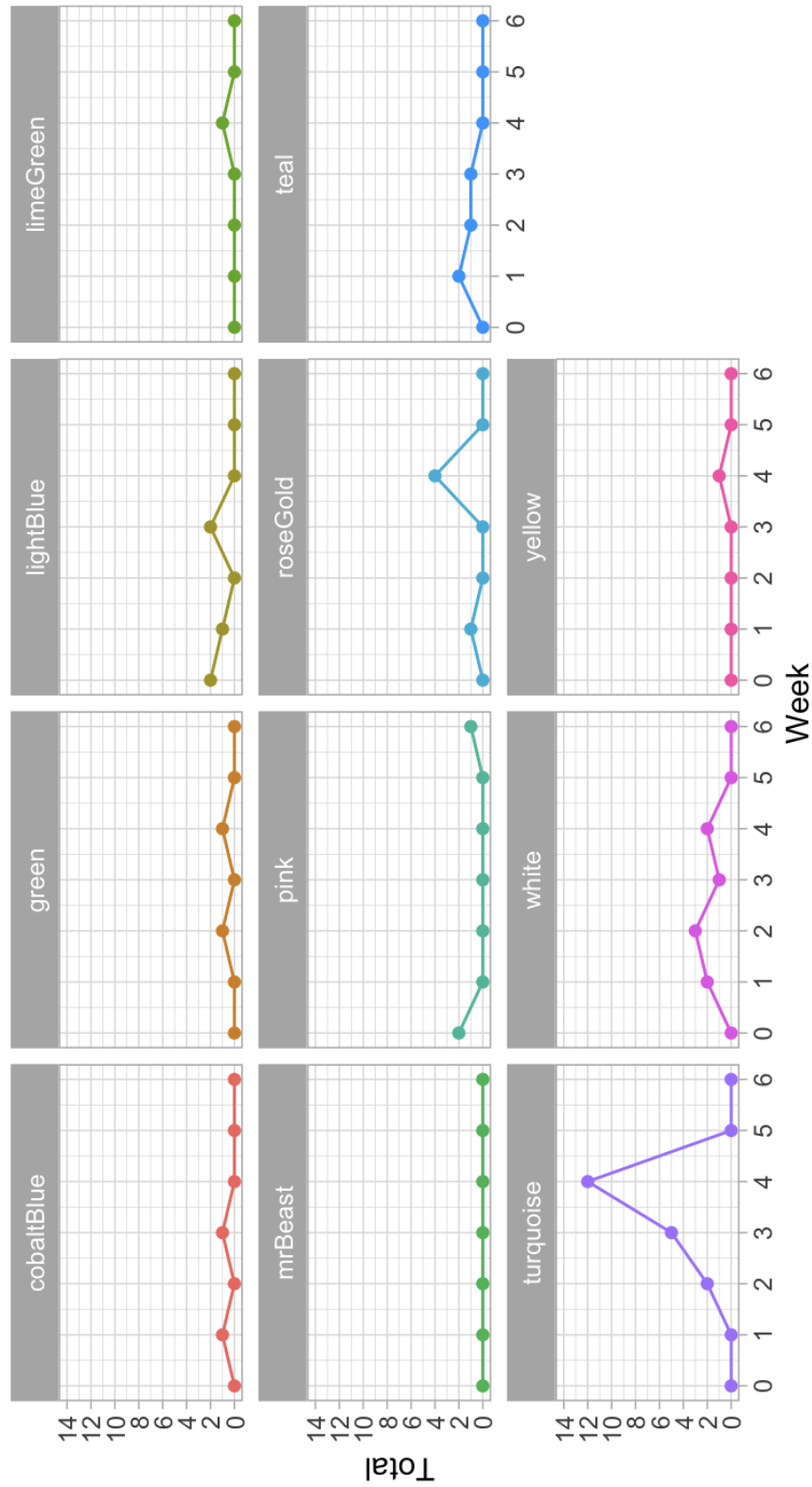




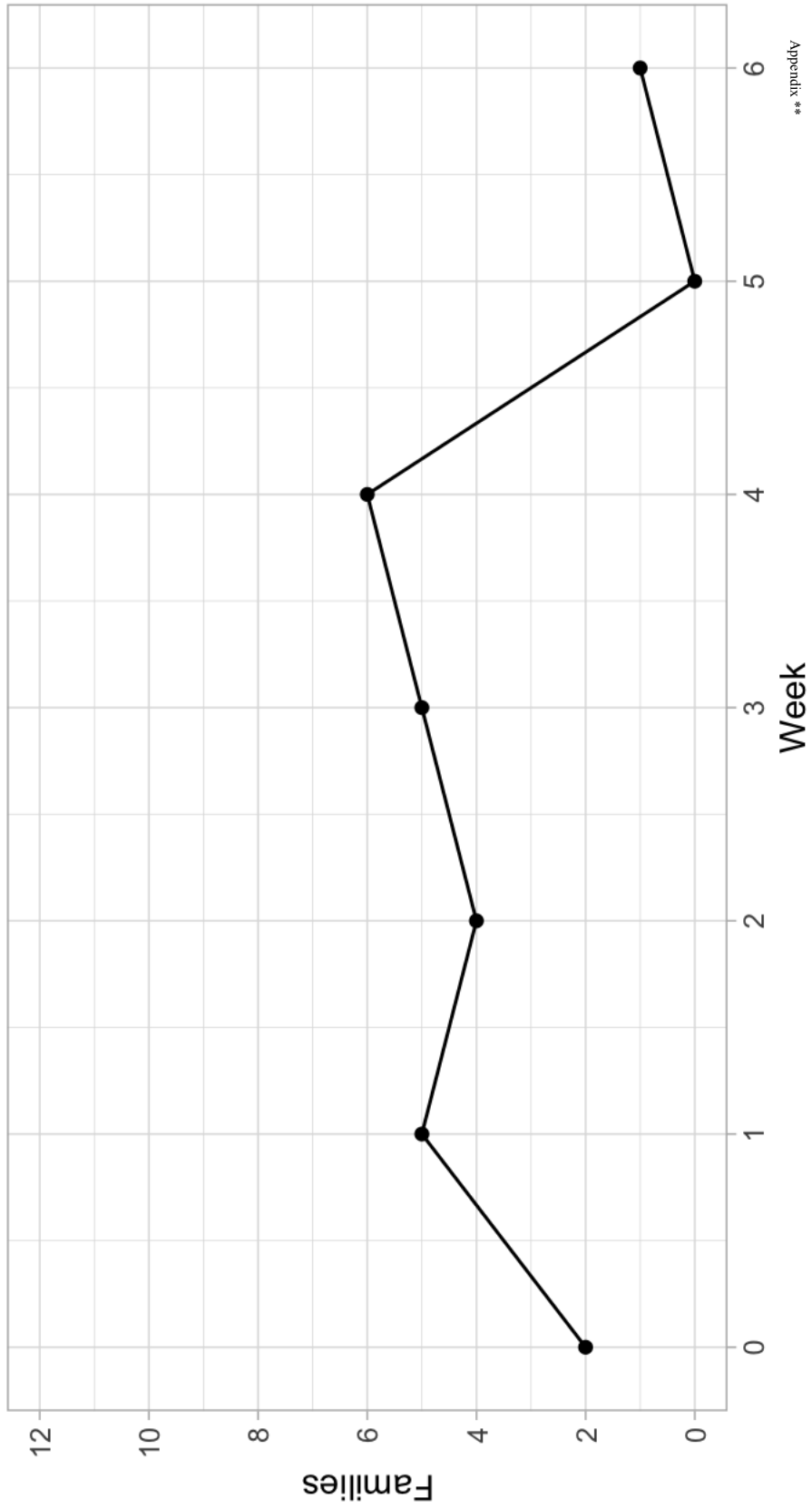


Occurrence of Covid Codes by Family

Covid Codes: C-14, I-3



Families with Covid Codes by Week
Covid Codes: C-14, I-3

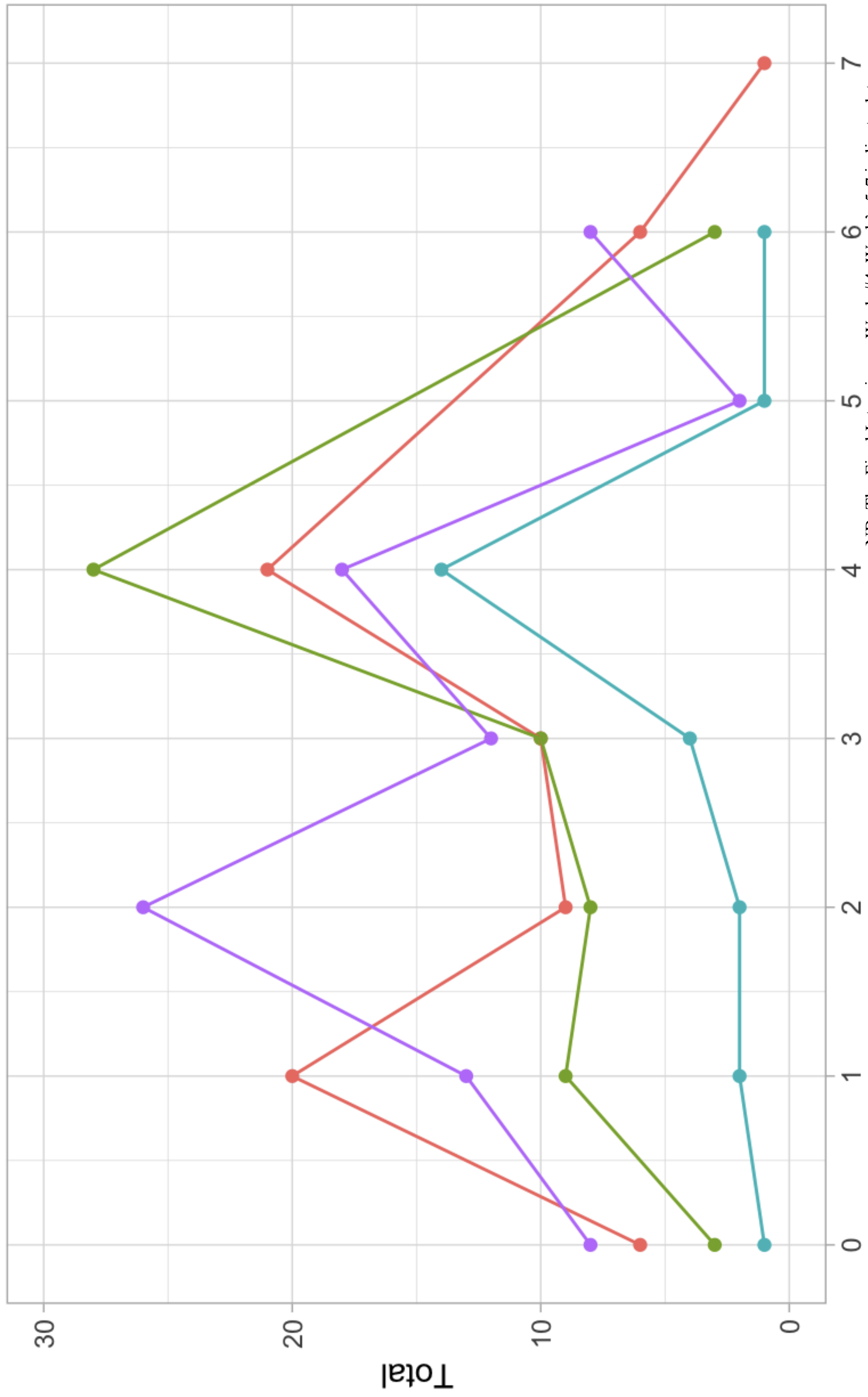


** Xipuddy

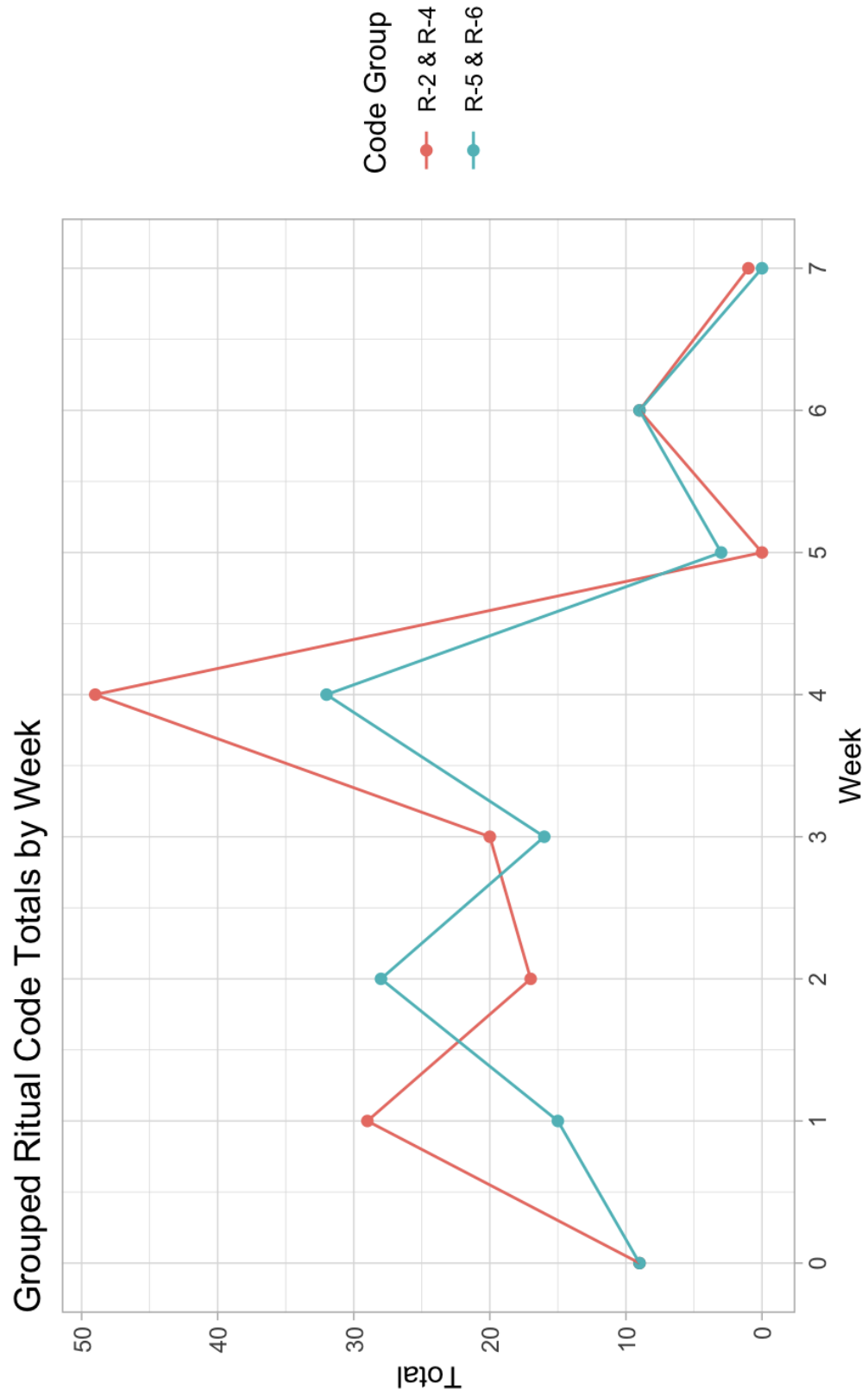
R-2: Value
 R-4: Generative
 R-5: Sustainable
 R-6: Ownership of

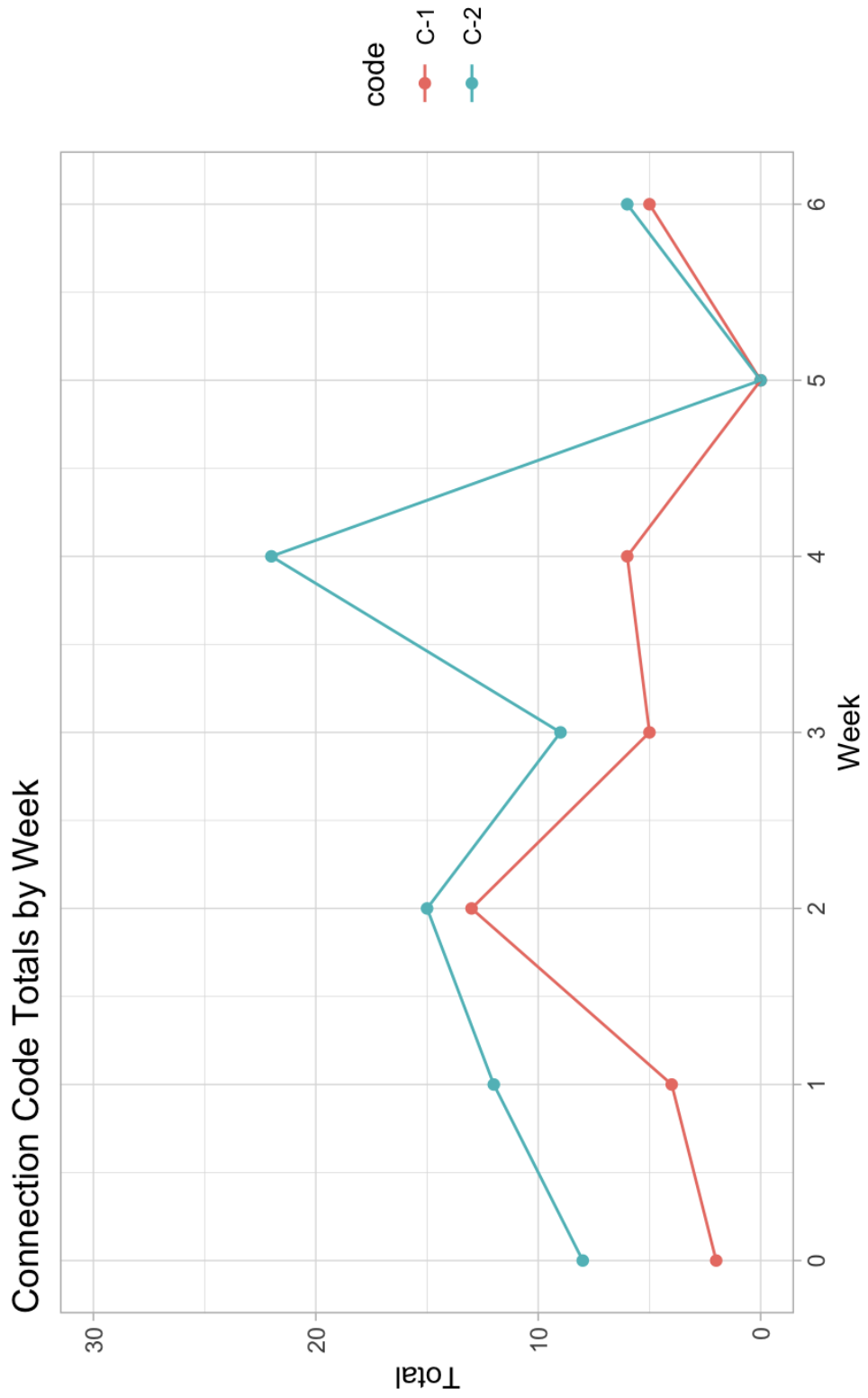
code
 R-2
 R-4
 R-5
 R-6

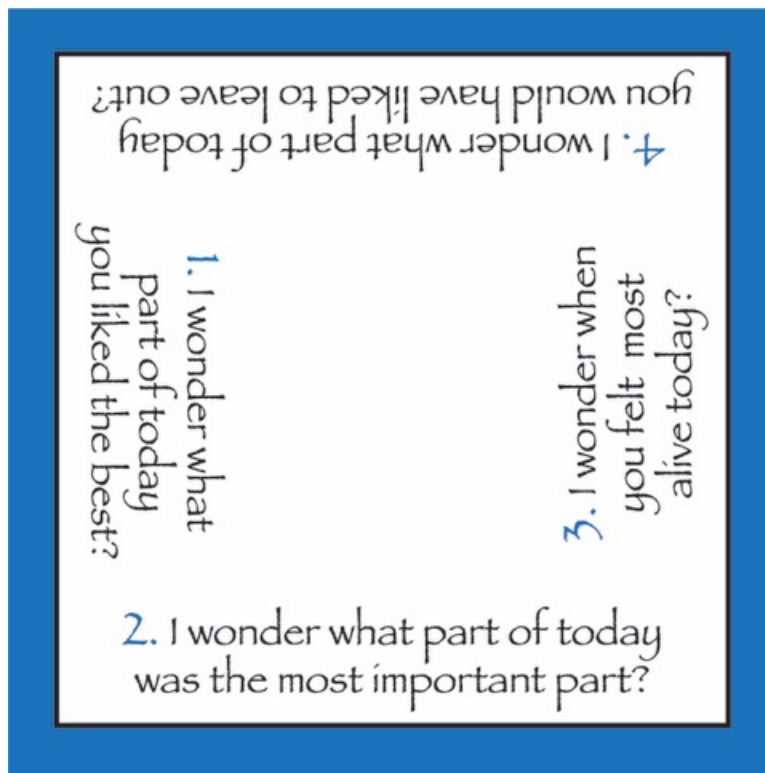
Ritual Code Totals by Week



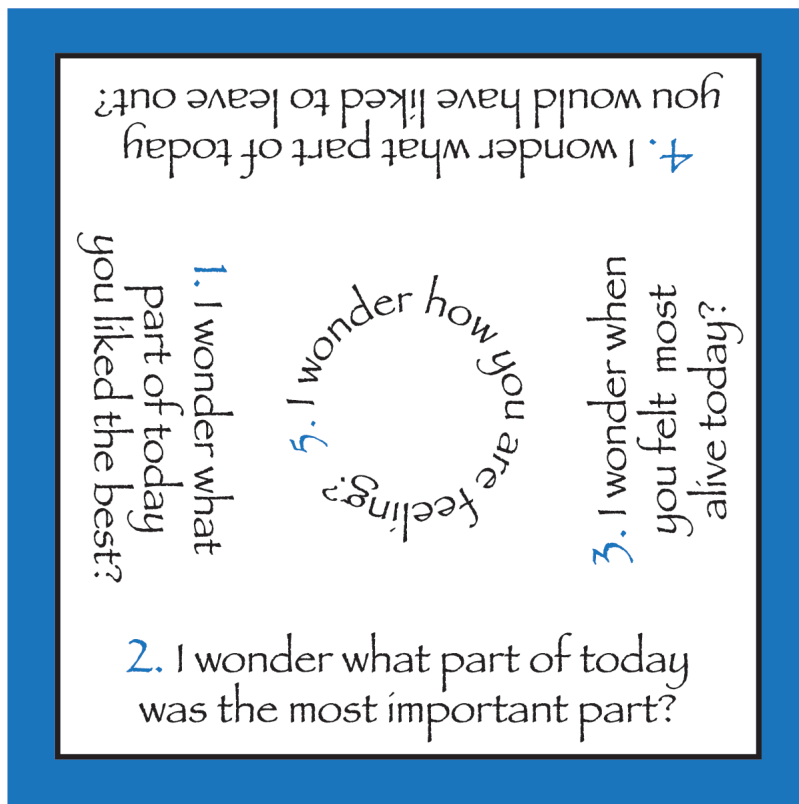
NB: The Final Interview = Week #4. Week's 5-7 indicate data received after the research period concluded.



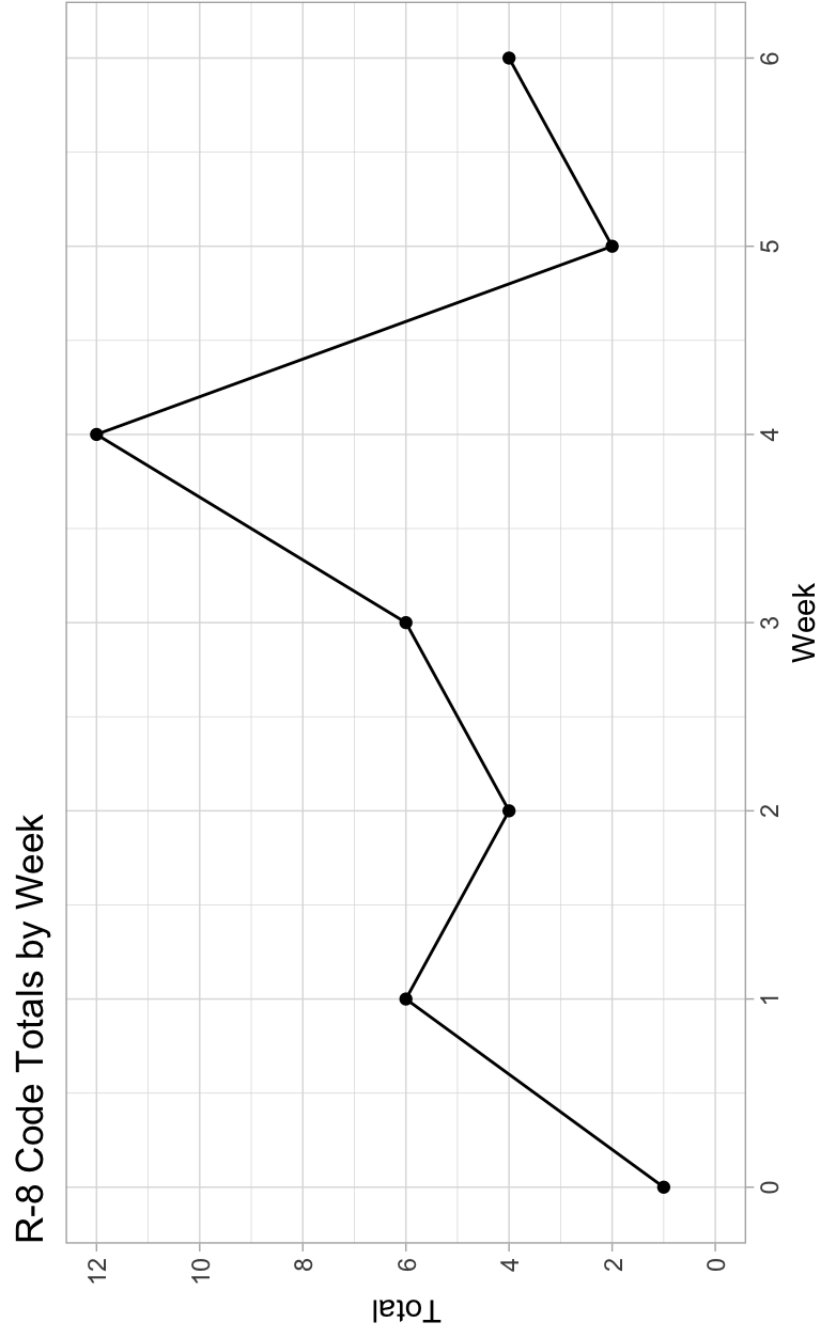


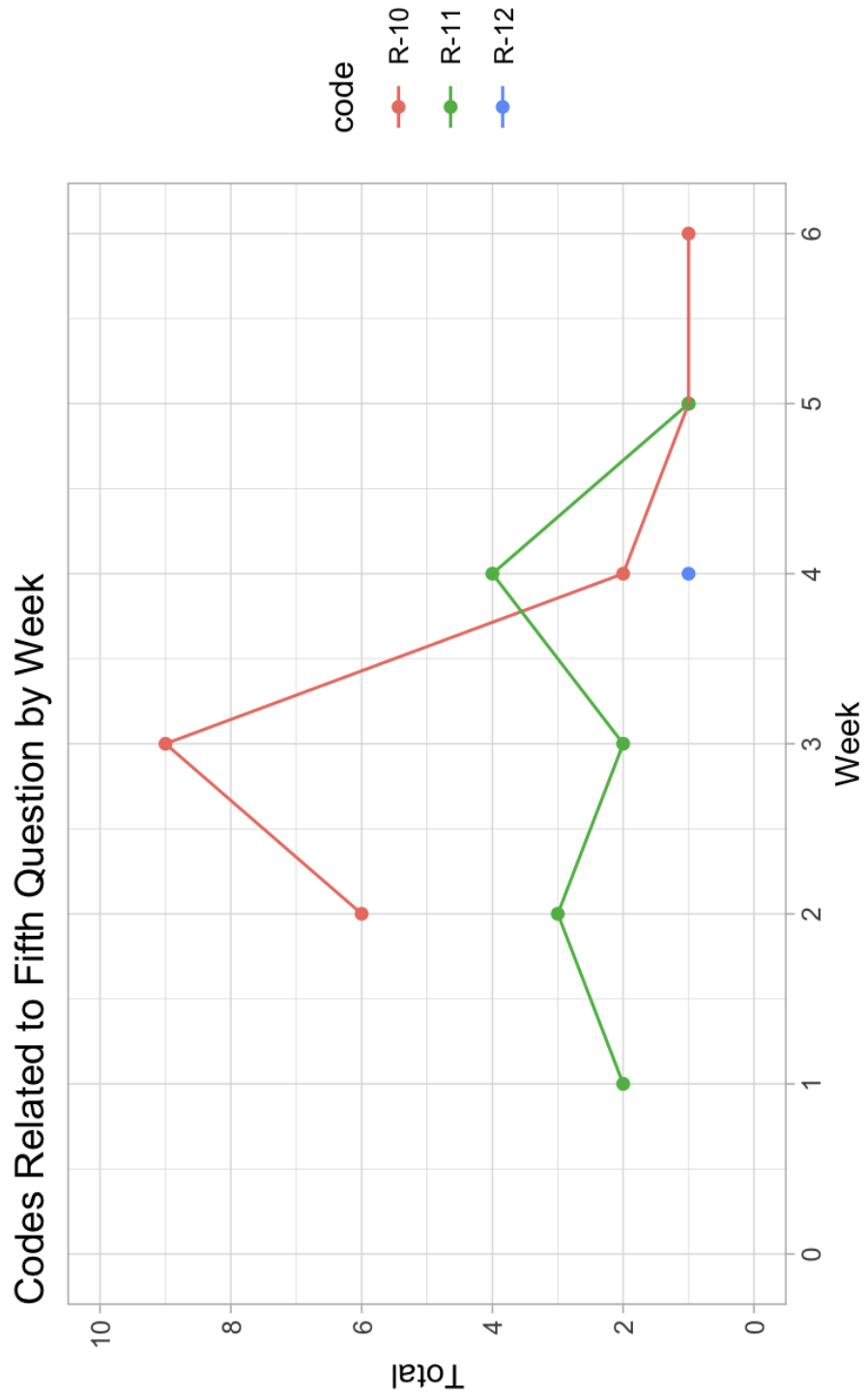


Graphic design courtesy of Bridget Read



Graphic design courtesy of Bridget Read





Bibliography

- Anderson, Herbert, and Edward Foley. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- Arnold, Margaret. "All the Way Down." *Lent 2 Sermon*.
<https://ststephenscohasset.org/Sermons>.
- Bailey, Tess, Sharon Montes MD, Veronique Mead, Jane Ellen Stevens, Kathy Shinaut. "PACEs Science 101." ACEs Too High, March 31, 2021.
<https://acestoohigh.com/aces-101/>.
- Beckwith, Ivy. *Formational Children's Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship*. Grand Rapids, MI, MI: Baker Books, 2010.
- Berryman, Jerome W. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1995.
- Berryman, Jerome W. *Stories of God at Home: A Godly Play Approach*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2018.
- Berryman, Jerome W. *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*. Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2009.
- Berryman, Jerome W. *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: An Imaginative Method for Presenting Scripture Stories to Children*. Vol. 8. Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2012.
- Berryman, Jerome, Cheryl V. Minor, Rosemary Beales, and Stephen Marchesi. *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 2, Revised and Expanded*. New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017.
- Bietti, Lucas M., Adrian Bangerter, Dominique Knutsen, and Eric Mayor. "Cultural Transmission in a Food Preparation Task: The Role of Interactivity, Innovation and Storytelling." *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 9 (2019): 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221278>.
- Blythe, Teresa, and Daniel Wolpert. *Meeting God in Virtual Reality: Using Spiritual Practices with Media*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004.

- Boehner, Joel. "Praying for Change: The Ignatian Examen in the 'Remedial' Classroom." *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 16, no. 2 (September 1, 2012): 215–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/205699711201600206>.
- Boynton, Petra M, and Trisha Greenhalgh. "Selecting, Designing, and Developing Your Questionnaire." *British Medical Journal* 328, no. 7451 (May 27, 2004): 1312–15. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.328.7451.1312>.
- Brewer-Smyth, Kathleen, and Harold G. Koenig. "Could Spirituality and Religion Promote Stress Resilience in Survivors of Childhood Trauma?" *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 35, no. 4 (2014): 251–56. <https://doi.org/10.3109/01612840.2013.873101>.
- Brown, Brené. "The Power of Vulnerability." *TEDxHouston*. Lecture, 2021. https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en#t-59365.
- Browning, Don S. *Equality and the Family: a Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.
- Bunea, Ioana Maria, Aurora Szentágotai-Tătar, and Andrei C. Miu. "Early-Life Adversity and Cortisol Response to Social Stress: a Meta-Analysis." *Translational Psychiatry* 7, no. 12 (2017): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-017-0032-3>.
- Cambria, Nancy, and Laurie Skrivan. "The Crisis Within: How Toxic Stress and Trauma Endanger Our Children." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 21, 2016. <https://graphics.stltoday.com/apps/stress/index.html>.
- Cavaletti, Sofia. *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*. Translated by Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter. Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992.
- Cavaletti, Sofia. "Chapter 11 Anthropological Catechesis." In *The Religious Potential of the Child: The Description of an Experience with Children from Ages Three to Six*, 168–75. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1983.
- Cavanaugh, Julie. "The Importance of Ritual Learning for the Development of Child Faith." *Crux* 55, no. 2 (2019): 24–34.
- Chandler, Marthe. "Religion, Ritual, and Family." *Philosophy East and West* 69, no. 1 (January 2019): 20–29. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2019.0022>.
- Charon, Rita. "Narrative Medicine." *JAMA* 286, no. 15 (2001): 1897–1902. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.286.15.1897>.

- Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. New York, NY: Avery, 2018.
- Coles, Robert. *The Spiritual Life of Children*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.
- Colosi, Laura. "Designing an Effective Questionnaire." Cornell Cooperative Extension. Cornell University College of Human Ecology, 2006.
<https://ag.purdue.edu/extension/pdehs/Documents/Designing%20an%20Effective%20Questionnaire.pdf>.
- Csinos, David M. *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning*. Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020.
- Dawson, George . E. *The Child and His Religion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1909.
- Driver, Tom Faw. *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and in Business*. New York, NY: Random House, 2012.
- Eisner, Elliot. "The Three Curricula That All Schools Teach." In *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 87–107. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd ed. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Espinoza, Benjamin D. "The Christian Story and Our Stories: Narrative Pedagogy in Congregational Life." *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 10, no. 2 (2013): 432–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131301000213>.
- Flett, Gordon L. *The Psychology of Mattering*, 2018, 295–305.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-809415-0.00014-1>.
- Foley, Edward. "Ritual Theory." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, edited by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, 143–52. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- Frick, Matilda A., Tommie Forslund, Mari Fransson, Maria Johansson, Gunilla Bohlin, and Karin C. Brocki. "The Role of Sustained Attention, Maternal Sensitivity, and Infant Temperament in the Development of Early Self-Regulation." *British Journal of Psychology* 109, no. 2 (2017): 277–98.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12266>.

- Friesen, John D. "Rituals and Family Strength." *Direction* 19, no. 1 (1990): 39–48.
- Galman, Sally Campbell. *Shane, the Lone Ethnographer: A Beginner's Guide to Ethnography*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007.
- Ganzevoort, R. Ruard. "Narrative Approaches." In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, edited by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, 214–23. Chichester West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.
- Gonzalez, Argos. "A Mindful Way to Reflect: Rose, Thorn, and Bud." *Mindful Schools*, June 22, 2020. <https://www.mindfulschools.org/inspiration/mindful-reflection/>.
- Hamm, Dennis. "Rummaging for God." *America*, May 14, 1994, 22–23.
- Hammersley, Martyn, and Paul Atkinson. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Routledge, 1996.
- Harper, Frederick D., Jacqueline A. Harper, and Aaron B. Stills. "Counseling Children in Crisis Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Basic Needs." *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 11–25.
- Hart, Onno van der. *Rituals in Psychotherapy: Transition and Continuity*. Translated by Angie Pleit-Kuiper. New York, NY: Irvington, 1983.
- Hay, David, and Rebecca Nye. *The Spirit of the Child*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011.
- Herman, David, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, and Robyn R. Warhol. *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012.
- Hogue, David. *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003.
- Isaacs, Ellen. "Ethnography: Ellen Isaacs at TEDxBroadway." TEDxTalks. YouTube, March 1, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV0jY5VgymI>.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, Sara, and Jessica Hoffmann Davis. *The Art and Science of Portraiture*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Lawson, Kevin E., and Scottie May. *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019.
- LeCompte, Margaret Diane, and Jean J. Schensul. *Designing & Conducting Ethnographic Research: An Introduction*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2010.

- LeCompte, Margaret Diane, and Jean J. Schensul. *Ethics in Ethnography a Mixed Methods Approach*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2015.
- L'Engle, Madeleine, and Avery Brooke. *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Spiritual Values in Children's Literature*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985.
- Lieberman, Matthew D., Naomi I. Eisenberger, Molly J. Crockett, Sabrina M. Tom, Jennifer H. Pfeifer, and Baldwin M. Way. "Putting Feelings Into Words." *Psychological Science* 18, no. 5 (May 1, 2007): 421–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01916.x>.
- Liebert, Elizabeth A. "Accessible Spiritual Practices to Aid in Recovery from Moral Injury." *Pastoral Psychology* 68, no. 1 (June 21, 2018): 41–57.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-018-0825-1>.
- Lillywhite, L.M., M.M. Saling, A. Demutska, R. Masterton, S. Farquharson, and G.D. Jackson. "The Neural Architecture of Discourse Compression." *Neuropsychologia* 48, no. 4 (2010): 873–79.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2009.11.004>.
- Linn, Dennis, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, and Francisco Miranda. *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995.
- Luecken, Linda J., Melissa J. Hagan, Irwin N. Sandler, Jenn-Yun Tein, Tim S. Ayers, and Sharlene A. Wolchik. "Cortisol Levels Six-Years after Participation in the Family Bereavement Program." *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 35, no. 5 (2010): 785–89.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2009.11.002>.
- Maiese, Michelle. "Transformative Learning, Enactivism, and Affectivity." *Studies in Philosophy & Education* 36, no. 2 (March 2017): 197–216.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-015-9506-z>.
- Martin, James. *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2012.
- Martin, Jane Roland. *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2002.
- Márquez Iván, and Paulo Friere. "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." Essay. In *Contemporary Latin American Social and Political Thought: An Anthology*, 163–72. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008.
- McCann, Colum. "The Power of Story." *Oprah*, April 2020.
- McLaren, Brian D. *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008.

- Mendoza, Melissa. "The Evolution of Storytelling." *Reporter*, May 1, 2015.
- Miller, Donald Eugene. *Story and Context: An Introduction to Christian Education*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987.
- Miller, Lisa, and Teresa Barker. *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. New York, NY: Picador/St. Martin's Press, 2016.
- Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J. *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Mitchell, Ella Pearson. "Oral Tradition: Legacy of Faith for the Black Church." *Religious Education* 81, no. 1 (1986): 93–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408600810110>.
- Mogel, Wendy. *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Timeless Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*. New York, NY: Scribner, 2008.
- Moschella, Mary Clark. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008.
- Murphy, Kate. *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters*. London, UK: Vintage Digital, 2020.
- Nelson, Gertrud Mueller. *To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1986.
- Nicholls, Pam. "Summary of Neuroscience: Insights from the Work of Dan Siegel, MD." Berkeley, CA: Mindful Schools, Curricular Digital File, 2013.
- Nouwen, Henri J M. *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation*. New York, NY: Image Books, 2000.
- Nye, Rebecca. *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*. London, UK: Church House Publishing, 2017.
- Ozcam, Pinar. "Comparative Case Method." Podcast. *Ethnography Atelier Podcasts*. Ethnography Atelier, August 2020. <https://www.ethnographyatelier.org/pinar-ozcan-podcast>.
- Parks, Sharon D. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search For Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.
- Pellowski, Anne. *The World of Storytelling*. Bronx, NY: H.W. Wilson, 1990.

- Price, Catherine. "Putting Down Your Phone May Help You Live Longer." *The New York Times*, April 24, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/well/mind/putting-down-your-phone-may-help-you-live-longer.html>.
- Ratcliff, Donald, ed. *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004.
- Reese, Elaine. "What Kids Learn from Hearing Family Stories." *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2013.
- Renaud, Sarah-Jane, Paraskevi Engarhos, Michael Schleifer, and Victoria Talwar. "Children's Earliest Experiences with Death: Circumstances, Conversations, Explanations, and Parental Satisfaction." *Infant and Child Development* 24, no. 2 (2014): 157–74. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.1889>.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties." Essay. In *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, edited by Mark I. Wallace, translated by David Pellauer, 236–48. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995.
- Robinson, Edward. *The Original Vision: A Study of the Religious Experience of Childhood*. New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1983.
- Rosenberg, Alexander. "Humans Are Hardwired to Tell History in Stories. Neuroscience Tells Us Why We Get Them Wrong." *Time.com*, October 10, 2018, N.PAG-N.PAG.
<https://library3.webster.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=132290014&site=ehost-live>.
- Rosenberg, Alexander. *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019.
- Saint Louis, Donald. "The Ignatian Examen: A Method of Theological Reflection." *The Way. Supplement* 55, 1986, 66–76.
- Saltzman, William R. "The FOCUS Family Resilience Program: An Innovative Family Intervention for Trauma and Loss." *Family Process* 55, no. 4 (December 13, 2016): 647–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12250>.
- Spoon, Bryan. "Neuroscience." *Belief and Neuroscience*, January 16, 2021.
<https://neurotheology.info/neuroscience/>.
- Steiner-Adair, Catherine, and Teresa Barker. *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*. New York, NY: Harper, 2014.

- Steinhäuser, Martin, Rune Øystese, and Jerome Berryman. "The Integrity of Godly Play as an Object for Research. A Consideration of Its Development, Assumptions, and Conceptual Unity." In *Gott Im Spiel: Europäische Perspektiven Auf Praxis Und Forschung = Godly Play: European Perspectives on Practice and Research*, 129–40. Münster, Germany: Waxmann, 2018.
- Steinhäuser, Martin, Rune Øystese, and John Chattin-McNichols. "Research on Godly Play: What Can Be Learned from Montessori Research?" In *Gott Im Spiel: Europäische Perspektiven Auf Praxis Und Forschung = Godly Play: European Perspectives on Practice and Research*, 175–83. Münster, Germany: Waxmann, 2018.
- Stone, Jerry H. "Narrative Theology and Religious Education." In *Theologies of Religious Education*, edited by Randolph Crump Miller, 256–84. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1995.
- Stonehouse, Catherine, and Scottie May. *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010.
- Taylor, Laurel Koepf. *Give Me Children or I Shall Die: Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.
- Tolbert, La Verne. *Exploring and Engaging Spirituality for Today's Children: A Holistic Approach*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2014.
- Tran, Mai-Ahn Li. "Human Subjects Research." *Eden Seminary Doctor of Ministry Video*. Lecture. St. Louis, MO, 2016.
- Tuckman, Bruce W. "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups." *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal* (reprint of original in *Psychological Bulletin* 1965 Vol 63:6) 3 (2001): 66–81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0022100>.
- Tye, Karen B. *Basics of Christian Education*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009.
- Walsh, Froma. "Family Resilience: A Framework for Clinical Practice." *Family Process* 42, no. 1 (2003): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2003.00001.x>.
- Watson, William M., George A. Aschenbrenner, J. Peter Sartain, and David Keith Townsend. *Sacred Story: An Ignatian Examen for the Third Millennium*. Seattle, WA: Sacred Story Press, 2012.
- Wiessner, Polly W. "Embers of Society: Firelight Talk among the Ju/'Hoansi Bushmen." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 39 (2014): 14027–35. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1404212111>.

Wimberly, Anne Streaty. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005.

Yalom, Irvin D. *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1980.

Yust, Karen-Marie, and Marcia J. Bunge. "The Dignity and Complexity of Children: Constructing Christian Theologies of Childhood." In *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions*, 53–68. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

Yust, Karen-Marie. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004.