The Stillness of the Secret Place[1]

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Children are not formed and influenced by schooling alone; they are drawn just as much by their own world and their own self-constituted environments. And for this, children do not need just the formal upbringing of the school curriculum; they also need freedom and openness to the beckoning of that which is as yet undetermined and uncertain. We want to observe the child in this situation in order to come to an understanding of the *whole* child. Do we know homes, old or modern, which offer the child those special places in otherwise familiar and trusted environments: places like the attic, the deep closet space, the tucked-away corners in the basement or storage shelters, or the space behind the full and heavy curtains?

How deep is the stillness behind the heavy curtains even when the room is full of noise and conversation. All the more reason to keep oneself quiet and still. For just as the transparency of the window pane opens up both the outer and the inner world, so the curtain allows sounds to pass through. And just as through the window one sees and is seen, so behind the curtain one hears and is heard. So much more reason to be quiet and unobtrusive behind the curtain. All that this curtain shows us —its snake-like boundary at the floor, the unpredictability even of this shifting and easily moved border, its pliancy, which betrays one at the slightest movement—all of this urges us to remain quietly within our boundaries. Don't move! Don't touch the curtain!

At other times the curtain hides the location where the mysterious Something remains hidden: the unexpected, the surprise. This is the place which guarantees intimacy and which is always enveloped in stillness. Who is disturbing the curtain? "A Rat?—No, Polonius!" But when Hamlet stabs his sword through here, he neither kills the one nor the other. Instead he inflicts retribution on that what was really hidden: Him, the marriage-wrecking lover of his mother, his father's murderer.

The poet Milne knows that in the child's world there is someone who lives behind the curtains:

In a corner of the bedroom is a great big curtain, 'Someone lives
behind it, but I don't know who; 'I think it is a Brownie, but I'm not
quite certain.
(Milne, "When We Were Very Young")

At first the child lives on this side of the curtain. But now he is about to make the curtain his hideout, his retreat. When he has entered his secret kingdom then "the world" lies "on the other side" for the child. The curtain becomes his sanctuary. The view of life changes completely at the moment when the child enters this haven and becomes an occupant of this hermitage. During the day it is very bright there behind the curtain and in the nearness to the window. In this miniature room the presence of Tangible Mystery hovers and recedes into the jungle of cords, strings, and rings and pulleys of the curtain rods.

The child does not hide as Polonius did behind the tapestry or behind a curtain which is used simply as decor or as a sound barrier in front of a door. No, it is behind the heavy curtains that frame the windows; this is where the child hides himself and where he may play even when it gets dark outside. The window belongs to this secret place because it allows light to enter, because it allows a view to outside, and finally, because—like the curtain—it separates everything while still supporting unity. How subtle, therefore, is this stay of glass and cloth which surrounds this secret place. It is also a favorite place for self-communion. Here one can quietly withdraw, daydream, and meditate; here one can slip into a slumbering sleep, but this sleep will not be filled with adventures or perilous deeds. The unusual character of this secret place is very unlike that of the attic or the basement cellar, which can be scary or spooky. The secret place behind the curtain is normally an unthreatening place to withdraw for the young child. Children who are still younger may hide instead under a table or simply turn their backs to us and play in a corner.

Looking out of the window from behind the curtain is a bit like looking at the world from a look-out post. And yet, this looking is not like spying as one may spy on people by looking at them from a balcony, for example. No, a child does not hide in his secret place behind the curtain with the intention of spying stealthily on someone. If that were the case, he would simply look for just any kind of place from where he could not be noticed. A child who spies on others still maintains a relationship with these others. The others stay with him in his present world as it were. Even the child who playfully hides himself from others' view in order to play or stimulate them into seeking does not find himself in a secret place behind the curtain. Because, in playing hide n' seek, he still remains oriented to the "other" as an object of his intentions from whom he hides himself. Whoever truly wants to enter the secret place must relinquish any intentional relationship toward others. Either he is fully immersed in the mood of the secret place or he is observing the wide world, which, though it may be far away, is still mysteriously enclosed in this space with him. So whether the child is dreaming or looking out at the world, in either way he is totally encapsulated and submerged in mystery.

This capturing and captured observing, this trance-like look of staring eyes, can nevertheless suddenly turn into an awareness of the environment which destroys the experience of mystery of the secret place. One says of someone who is simply staring beyond until some object captures his attention that he "awoke out of his dream" and that his "interest was stimulated."

Whoever is spying or hiding himself, therefore, cannot find shelter in a secret place. There are even fantasy worlds which have no relation with the notion of the secret place. We all know how children construct make-believe places and make-believe objects out of ordinary things in the house. Once I heard of a place called "Relevia," a name which the children gave the make-believe land which they inhabited and which ran criss-cross through the whole house they shared with their parents. The

children had made up this land. It included many everyday household objects, and they spoke of it with such certainty that their mother, who has since become the grandmother of her children's children, could not rid herself of the picture of this Relevia whenever she wanted to think of a new world. Much later she published a book entitled *Relevia, A New Economic System*—an order under which I myself would have liked to live.

The comprehensive scheme of a community in which the children go their own way was included in this ordered illusion. Such illusionary worlds are not at all rare. Think of the island of Robinson Crusoe and of how often parents themselves show an indulgent attitude towards such fantasy. The world of fairy tales and actual history interchange here in the yearnings after an ever lasting childhood. Here we encounter a phenomenon wherein some of the characteristics of the secret place are found in extended vision.

It is true that the child may lose himself in the experience of the secret place. But why should we insist on the priority of the need for systematization, formulation, explicitness, and order? In the modern world everything tends to become rationalized and is therefore more available to the adult. In contrast, fantasy may create an ordered world but only to work out possible arrangements within the confines of a world of open possibilities which is, after all, still a world in the style of the everyday and shared world. Relevia, for example, had its own monetary system.

The secret place, however, never has such orderly structure. Or, to say it differently, the secret place is not a world built up by fantasy and creative imagination. Rather, it maintains the character of a creative simplicity of effortlessness, of the waking dream, of something unique, a mood, which can be recalled time and again. In Relevia, tales like "Eselhaut" or "Rumpelstilzchen" represent a form of celebration, as they do in the normal world. They are related to the spirit of the secret place, albeit distantly. But the actual experience of the secret place is always grounded in a mood of tranquility, peacefulness: It is a place where we can feel sheltered, safe, and close to that with which we are intimate and deeply familiar. In his retreat, the author Jan Ligthart was forever involved in arranging and rearranging his small, unread religious tract. Others will take their treasures or collections to the secret place to be reinspected and reorganized for the thirty-sixth time. And, although the secret place is an actual place where one feels safe and secure, still it is not a hiding place for something like hide-and-go-seek. But it is the place where somehow direct understanding reigns when one child is in the company of another child. Words are unnecessary here. Speech occurs in the deep silence of an a priori understanding. Often the tone of voice changes into the tonality of intimacy.

Let us summarize. All examples of childish fantasy—like Relevia—all of these occasionally entered worlds have a determinate character. They are not places like the secret place,—where the experience of deep mystery is possible; they are not places, like the secret place, untouched by the mood of everydayness.

Precisely because the secret place is devoid of anything determinate is it a place where the experience of peace and contentment is possible. The secret place is withdrawn from involvement, and therefore it is a place of rest. Peace reigns there only because human interaction is suspended: it is held in abeyance. In the secret place the child can find solitude. This is also a good pedagogic reason to permit the child his secret place and to respect his right to asylum, or at least to tolerate it. Although the child's interactions with others are temporarily suspended in the secret place, this does not mean that others are not in some sense present in this space. Physically others remain on the outside, but they are still present on the inside because they are still seen or observed by the child. And this normal and disinterested observation can turn into an attentive watching when the child's interest is sparked by something. At that moment the "other" is again there and becomes an object of interest, and the secret place becomes part of the usual world, a simple hiding place, or lookout post.

The usual kind of awareness found in the secret place is not oriented towards anything in particular, not focussed onto any special object or event. Rather, this mode of awareness is diffused, object-poor, scattered, and often dreamlike. It acquires significance in the sincere experience of depth, happiness, or melancholy, which can accompany the special quietude of the mode of being which belongs to children. From the phenomenological point of view, quietude is not only the opposite of noise, but it is much more the opposite of the noise of life itself. This place , then, is not simply hostile to "loudness" but rather to "noise" in a deeper sense. From this place the child awakes with a sigh of deliverance. At this moment his view is panoramic, free. In other words, the child is permitted a new and open attentiveness to the life of his personal world, a world which includes inner and outer life, a world therefore in which both possibilities meet. Only when some-"thing" in the world or some other person calls on the child in a manner that forces the child again into an attitude of spiritual distance and objective participation is the world again experienced as separate from us, devoid of the inner force. Then disgust can rise up and wash over us like a flood which throws us back onto the steep cliffs of an objective form of being stripped of all spirituality. Now we are given back to the world of *things*, and we find ourselves in a common world which we share with others. But were we ever farther away from these others than just at this moment? Only after the world has taken us back and greeted us with her trust can we concern ourselves with our everyday work, our usual activities.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a brief in-between-time, an interregnum between the secret place and the common world, in which there is as yet no embroilment: the clock hesitates as it is about to strike the hour; we stand still absently at the threshhold. "What is it then, son? Are you not quite awake yet?" And there is the noise! Brother and sister are gabbling; we become aware of mother's voice; the scraping sounds of knives and forks. Is the bus arriving at the stop? A quiet, embarrassed smile signifies the recognition of the others and our relation

to them. The child has then, as we say, finally "come to himself." An appropriate expression in as much as this return to the common world actually signifies a coming-to-oneself. To make it easier for the child who was "beside himself" to "come to himself," one sometimes leads him out of the common space where the other family members reside. The child may be sent away in punishment to come to himself by himself.

At moments like this the child may take refuge in a secret place. And so, one finds him behind the curtain in the living room again, or maybe under a bed, in a closet, in the basement or in the loft, possibly asleep, maybe just relaxing, or still pouting. Usually just the absence of a "public audience" has caused the flowing back of affectivity. The secret place can call forth still more powerful results than quietude and passivity which were meted out as punishment and which release inner experiences of such imbalance that the interference of another person is sometimes necessary to end this mood. But something positive grows out of the secret place as well, something which springs from the inner spiritual life of the child. That is why the child may actively long for the secret place. But if a child is forced to go there, he may begin to panic. This could be wordless panic, and just because of its unspeakable nature it is all the more frightening and disturbing. Certainly, the punished child can, if he finds himself in this space, come to himself and find again the value of the secret place as soon as the feelings of punishment have vanished. "To come to oneself" means to be ready again to adopt an attitude, ready to give oneself in trust to the place where one finds oneself. At that moment the "space" of punishment is shut out, and with it fear and anxiety also disappear.

The secret place is only safe and peaceful when it is the act of a free choice, a preferential place. It could also be that one just came there to look for something or to take something there. A place where we are productively engaged is, of course, a safe place, but it is not a place of indeterminacy, it is not a secret place. There need only be a bench there and already it is Peter's workshop, and everyone will know it as Peter's workshop. He works there happily, whistling or singing, making hellish noise, etc. Neither the happy quiet of contemplation and inner life nor the aversion thereof can enter this place. Here we are totally "at home." And so this is not the other, strange, and self-made world of self enclosed secrecy. "John, watch out for the bedroom lamp! Don't make so much noise!" — "Yes Mother." No longer a secret place, the attic is once again a part of the house.

Let us watch the child who not only has secret places in his home, but who also has forbidden places and who therefore knows areas of the house as defined and distinct places. In some homes, the parents' bedroom provides this forbidden area, in others, it is sometimes the formal living room, the study, or the furnace room downstairs. Only the "well behaved" children seem to be able to live as if the forbidden areas simply do not exist. But the child who cannot remain indifferent to these places is called "bad" or at least somewhat "bad." He finds himself at the threshold of transgression, and the door, which slowly opens, lures the child towards transgression. One throws a quick glance into the

forbidden realm. The things in there all make long faces and look back at us darkly. At any rate, they are uncommunicative and unrelenting. They don't speak to us. If one wanted to hide, this probably would be the place where no one would search. But one does not dare to enter. In a forbidden place like this we would feel as if someone were looking at us with threatening eyes. The silence, if not hostile, is at least lifeless and therefore paralyzing. Nothing can win us over to interest us in its presence. And that is the reason why we get bored in a forbidden place. We flee from it like the lonely person flees from a place like the attic. For here we are not in No-Man's land. Here we are quite definitely in "foreign lands," out of place.

The phenomenological analysis of the secret place of the child shows us that the distinctions between the outer and inner world melt into a single, unique, personal world. Space, emptiness, and also darkness reside in the same realm where the soul dwells. They unfold in this realm and give form and sense to it by bringing this domain to life. But sometimes this space around us looks at us with hollow eyes of disappointment; here we experience the dialogue with nothingness; we are sucked into the spell of emptiness, and we experience the loss of a sense of self. This is also where we experience fear and anxiety. The mysterious stillness of the curtain, the enigmatic body of the closed door, the deep blackness of the grotto, the stairway, and the spying window which is placed too high to look through, all these lead to the experience of anxiety. They may seem to guard or cover an entry-way or passage. The endless stairway, the curtains which move by themselves, the door which is suspiciously ajar, or the door which slowly opens, the strange silhouette at the windows are all symbols of fear. In them we discover the humanness of our fears. For the animal neither the curtain nor the door, neither the stairs nor the grotto are grounds for panic. The animal suspects no threat in the darkness. Only humans know this kind of anxiety which arises in a world created and given significance by humans themselves. The very small child does not know this specific human anxiety. His life is in such an intense, organic-dynamic symbiosis with his immediate environment that his sense-making of the world occurs in a fundamentally dialectic mode. The child sees himself already formed in comparison to things outside himself; these things ground his existence, but his "I" has distanced very little from his world. As soon as the child begins to be able to distance himself, that is, as soon as we can feel that the child is accomplishing the impossible—the separation of the previously united elements as soon as the first contrast is traceable in him, even if it is only the opposition of his "I" to the world—then human anxieties gather themselves unto him.

This happens during the third, fourth and fifth year of his life. And gradually, as the "I" begins to assert itself against the world, the anxieties disappear in degrees. So we see in the research of Jersild and Holmes that anxiety lessens greatly after the fifth and sixth year. Their beginnings then signify initially the development of a unique human personality in which the first opposition between world and "I" becomes conscious and in which the world is experienced as "other"—a world that

is not yet fully understood or under control by the child, a strange world so it seems, a world to which also the school belongs!

We have seen that the indeterminate place speaks to us, as it were. In a sense, it makes itself available to us. It offers itself, in that it opens itself. It looks at us in spite of the fact and because of the fact that it is empty. This call and this offering of availability are an appeal to the abilities of the child to make the impersonal space into his very own, very special place. And the secrecy of this place is first of all experienced as the secrecy of "my-own-ness." Thus in this void, in this availability, the child encounters the "world." Such an encounter the child may have experienced before in different situations. But this time it encounters the world in a more addressable form—everything which can occur in this openness and in this availability, the child must actively fashion or at least actively allow as a possibility.

In the world-shared-in-common things acquire their significance exactly because of this in-common-ness. The others constantly remind us as it were that a spoon is to be used only as a spoon. It is not a boat. The common world is a statute which comes to the child from the past. One cannot argue with it. Our parents, all people, and even all things indiscernable in their particular characteristics, in their materiality, are completed facts. And so we say, "That's just the way things are." We can make them the center of our playful games; we can spin dreams around them; we can project in them whatever it is that we want ourselves to be or become. But they always answer us in their own particular way of doing things, which in turn awakens our own. In the secret place, in comparison, we are far removed from all this. The world is delivered from us—and also, we are delivered from the world. It's the same thing. The path that the child must travel to get from the world-in-common to his own place is not too far, for this place borders on his own everyday living space. It is an enclave within it. From the familiar everyday living space one can dare to take the step into the unformed and just this unformed realism then becomes part of the "personal" life or part of what is the secret of this place. During all the stages leading to adulthood, the secret place remains an asylum in which the personality can mature; this self-creating process of this standing apart from others, this experiment, this growing in self-awareness, this creative peace and absolute intimacy demand it—for they are only possible in alone-ness.

Notes

1. This is an excerpt of a much longer essay on the secret place in the life of the child. This and other selected lifeworld studies by Langeveld are currently being translated by Max van Manen in a project supported by the University of Alberta Support for the Advancement of Research Fund. I thank Peter Mueller for his assistance with the first draft.

2. From M. J. Langeveld, *Scholen Maken Mensen,* Purmerend: J. Muusses, 1967.