

Playtime – July 23, 2023

Readings

This morning, we begin with three readings on this morning's theme of Play:

The World Opens to Us by Glynn Rosenberg

The world opens to us, newborn and uncurling its perfect tiny fists, fingers stretching out and up to us. We are graced with the beauty of the infinitely complex universe. As children, we wander our world, eyes wide, receiving the blessed gifts the world thrusts upon us unquestionably. We are surprised and baffled by the absurdity of our own existence. There is nothing worth doing; we sit and marvel at the beauty of all things, playing, just as we're meant to. We are content because we don't need to understand, we're happy to simply exist in this wonderfully intricate place. But as we grow older, the beauty seems to dry up. We see with too much clarity the squirming filth under rocks and the tragedy of human nature. The universe no longer seems miraculous, and we try to hide ourselves from it, inside cars and behind office doors. We shield our eyes with coffee mugs and newspapers. We're afraid to see what the world holds, we're afraid it's not beautiful anymore. We all need to play again. Throw up your hands to the immense and growing sky, simply feel the weight of existence upon your skin. Marvel at the beauty of the storm and the pure, black earth beneath our feet. The universe gives itself to us unconditionally. All we need to do is awaken from our self-induced dreams and be blessed by the charity of being.

>>*Our second reading is from Types of UU Transcendence by Rev. Jim Eller*

...Play is a form of Unitarian Universalist transcendence. In play we lose ourselves and enter a kind of time out of time. When we play full on, we can fall out of regular time and enter time as defined by that play. We become lost in order to be found. It is what holidays can offer. It is a place to stretch and be stretched. It is like the ...family football games, or croquet on the lawn in my childhood. When one is playing, one is on a different time, no longer measured by the standard units of the larger society, but rather by the peculiar ones of the game in question. In the "serious" world it may be 11 a.m. on such and such a day, month and year. But in the universe in which one is playing it may be the third round, the fourth act, the allegro movement, or the second kiss. In playing, one steps out of one time into another.

Yes, to play is to be in the moment of joy and ecstasy with another and is a signal of transcendence. In play we escape the pain, the sorrow, the conflict of everyday life, and play becomes the center of our life. It can be a place of pure joy, which seems to reach beyond time for a moment or two.

>>*And finally, an excerpt from J.D. Salinger's, Catcher in the Rye:*

Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around - nobody big, I mean - except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff - I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be.

Playtime

This morning's service was supposed to be an easy one – which, isn't to say I was just going to phone it in – but my plans were to use one of the sermons recommended by our Touchstone's worship resource subscription. The theme this month is "Play", and with summer vacation already half over, it seemed like a good time to remind everyone to get out and enjoy themselves.

So I sat down with the resources, found some sermons that contained messages and insights that struck a chord, and worked to combine them into a single, coherent sermon. But as I did so, I found myself drawn to the topic more than I expected – and after chasing down a couple of quotes that lead down some rabbit holes, I found that the idea of Play meant more to me than I expected. And, to be honest, one of the things I like most about leading services is exploring topics that spark a new way of thinking or feeling and, perhaps, generating a bit of personal growth. I mean, isn't that what we're all hoping for when we come here on Sunday?

So – come along with me this morning as we explore the idea of Play – what it is, why it's good for us, and how we can get more of it...

To begin, I'd like to share a story that comes from Boston College psychology researcher, Dr. Peter Gray:

A few years ago I had an experience that helped me see the difference between play and PLAY. I was invited by two ten-year-old girls, whom I knew well, to play a game of Scrabble. I've played a fair amount of Scrabble in my life and am not bad at it. [...] The two girls, in contrast, were complete novices. So, I saw this as an opportunity to teach; I would teach them the rules and some of the strategy of Scrabble. I would be their Scrabble mentor!

But, as it turned out, they taught me something way more important than Scrabble.

They loved the basic situation—taking turns at putting down letters in an organized way on the board, with sets of letters interlocking with other sets in crossword fashion, making interesting designs. But they had no interest at all in keeping score, and the idea of limiting themselves to real, actual words—words that can be found in the dictionary—bored them. They very quickly and effortlessly, with no overt discussion at all, and despite my initial protests, developed their own rules and strategy.

Their unstated but obvious goal, on each turn, was to put down the longest, funniest nonsense word that they could, using as many letters as possible from their rack combined with at least one

letter on the board. It had to follow the rules of English phonology (or, as they would have put it, it had to sound like it could be a word), but it could not be an actual word. The object was not to score points but to make each other laugh, and laugh they did! They laughed like only two high-spirited ten-year-old girls who have long been best friends can laugh. Sometimes one would “challenge” the other’s “word,” asking for a definition, and the other would offer a hysterical definition that somehow seemed to fit with the way the “word” sounded; and then they would laugh even harder.

I realized, as I pulled back and watched them and began to laugh along with them, that my way of playing was something like what we usually call work. Their way of playing was play. I realized, too, that I used to play like that, as a child. What had happened to me in the interim?

Let’s pause here for a moment for a bit of reflection on that story: how do you feel listening to that game of imaginary Scrabble? Do you remember playing games like that when you were younger? Do you long for more of those childhood giggles and silliness?

Or are you like me and get the heeby geebies from it? My initial reaction was the same as the authors: That’s not Scrabble. Scrabble has rules and an official dictionary with real words!

And that’s when I realized that somewhere along the way I’ve gotten old – and a little bit curmudgeonly. Now, I can remember being younger and goofing around like that. I have vivid memories of getting lost in my imagination as I played with my Transformers in my bedroom, but I can’t really remember the last time, as an adult, that I *played – all-in and lost in the fun played*. These days, I’m more likely to be found on the periphery of others having a good time – and it honestly brings me joy to watch that – but I’m rarely in the midst of it laughing and sharing in the fun.

Which is why this morning’s topic called to me. Sometimes, as I watch children playing, I feel a longing – and a loss – for the happy-go-lucky person I feel like I used to be.

According to researcher Dr. Stuart Brown, just as our quieting says “stillness is important to the human spirit”, so is play – and if anyone knows anything about play, it’s Dr. Stuart Brown.

Dr. Brown found his calling in the aftermath of the 1966 Texas Tower combination mass murder-suicide committed by Charles Whitman, an otherwise charming, 25-year-old student with no past criminal history.

For four months, Dr. Brown and a group of other psychiatrists poured through every aspect of Whitman’s life to identify what could have lead to this tragedy. Ultimately, the commission unanimously agreed that one of the primary contributing factors was that in his childhood, his Free Play had been suppressed by his sadistic, overbearing father.

Dr. Brown was fascinated by this idea that a lack of childhood play could lead to aberrant adult behavior, so he began a study comparing the life-histories of both males incarcerated for murder and felony drivers against a control group of everyday people, and he found that both the

prisoners and drivers had histories of suppressed play in their youth – leading him to conclude that play deprivation is a contributing factor to a propensity for future violence or other life dysfunctions.

His conclusions led him to a life of research on play and, in the early 1990s, he founded the National Institute for Play, a 501c(3) non-profit dedicated to advancing society's understanding and application of play to help us all lead healthier, happier lives.

Now, to understand why Play is so important to leading a fulfilling life, first we have to take a short field trip into the world of Biology – and specifically, the brain. Humans – and many other animals – have a biological drive to play that has evolved over millions of years. For example, dogs love to chase balls, wrestle, and play tug-of-war at all ages of their lives.

When we are born, our brains a mass of cellular possibilities. We have a bunch of neurons – brain cells - but they're kind of just floating around and aren't connected to one another. The first years of our lives, all of the input from our senses help create connections from one part of the brain to another – and play is a key factor in creating those connections.

As infants, play can be as simple as just interacting with our environment and making sense of what we're feeling and experiencing. As toddlers, we play by learning to move, experimenting with physical objects, and creating stories. And as children, our play expands to include others – at first just playing *near* other children (called “parallel play”) and eventually learning to play *with* others – hide and seek, make-believe, rough-and-tumble fighting.

All these different types of activities – all these different ways of playing - allow children to enter a state where their brains are being wired for the skills they'll need as they grow – physical agility, social confidence and norms, emotional regulation, creativity, resilience, respect for others, and more. And even as adults, the more time we spend in this playful state of mind, the more we keep those connections from falling into disrepair; playing literally keeps our minds young.

Unfortunately, as children grow and enter school, playtime is set aside for “serious” study. Recess is eliminated and creative arts are replaced with math and science. This lack of play for children has been shown to increase depression, inflexibility in changing situations, a lack of empathy, poor impulse control, addictive behaviors, and an increase in violence.

So if play is so important to both our spirit and our physical well-being, what is it exactly? Well, that's not as easy to define because, as Dr. Peter Gray (of the Scrabble story) explains:

The characteristics of play all have to do with motivation and mental attitude, not with ... the behavior itself. Two people might be throwing a ball ... and one might be playing while the other is not. To tell which one is playing ... you have to infer from their expressions and the details of their actions.

Think back to a time when you watched children playing – like, really playing without adult interference. What are some elements you might observe that indicate that they are really playing?

Dr. Gray has spent his life studying just that, and he has identified five key elements that define Play:

- The activity must be self-chosen and self-directed – it's not play if you're doing something because someone else told you to
- It must be intrinsically motivated – as in the activity itself is more valued than the end product – think of going for a hike vs. going for a hike and constantly trying to burn more calories
- The activity must be structured based on rules in the player's mind – you can think back to the Dr. Gray's Scrabble story, although I personally think that if you've agreed to the rules ahead of time, it can still count as play
- It must have an imaginative or creative aspect to it
- The player must be wholly engaged in the activity without being stressed about it

It's relatively easy to identify when a child is fully engaged in their own playful activity – without the responsibilities of the world weighing upon their shoulders, children naturally do what they are innately motivated to do. In adults, playfulness is more of a sliding scale combining a playful state of mind with adult responsibilities. As Dr. Gray says:

Play is not necessarily all or none. Play can [exist] from zero up to 100 percent ... the adjective playful is often more useful than the noun play, which tends to be interpreted as all or none. People can, to varying degrees, bring a 'playful attitude' or 'playful spirit' to [a situation] ... pure play (100 percent playful) is more common in children than in adults. ... We don't have metrics for these things, but I would estimate that my behavior in writing this book is about 80 percent play. That percentage varies ... it decreases when I worry about deadlines or how critics will evaluate it, and it increases when I'm focused only on the current task of researching or writing.

The degree to which an activity is engaging, self-chosen, self-directed, internally motivated and internally rewarding all contribute to a subjective sense of how playful the activity is. An activity that meets all five of Dr. Gray's criteria is 100% playful or what we would call play (the noun).

But 100% isn't always attainable – in fact, it rarely is for adults - but if an activity meets many of them and is something that you want to do again and again, then those activities put us in what Dr. Brown, of the National Institute of Play, calls a "state of play."

And what are some activities that can lead to a state of play? Well, that all depends on who you are – after all, what one person finds fascinating and enjoyable is probably completely boring to another. But after years of research and thousands of interviews and observations, Dr. Brown has developed a set of eight Play Personalities that can help you hone in on the type of play that works best for you. I'm going to describe each of the personalities and, as I do, take note of which ones resonate with you:

The Collector

For the Collector, the thrill of play comes from having an interesting collection of things — coins, toy trains, antiques, wine. Collections can be pretty much anything — including experiences. A person who wants to visit all of the national parks — now that might seem like the action of an explorer, a personality we'll cover later — but if their joy derives from methodically collecting evidence of their visits, they are probably a collector. Collectors may enjoy collecting as a solitary activity, or they may share it with others by joining a group or a club dedicated to the same type of collection.

The Competitor

Competitors access the euphoria and creativity of play by participating in a competitive game with specific rules. (and this is where I was saying that Dr. Gray and Dr. Brown have differing opinions in whether the rules have to be internal or if they can be external...) Competitors aren't playing just for the game for fun; they are playing to win. If games and keeping score are your thing, this may be your primary play personality. Competitors may enter the state of play through an individual activity — like a single-player video game or a hand of solitaire — or by paying a team sport like baseball. They may actively participate in the game or just watch, as a fan. Competitors frequently make themselves known in social groups, where the fun comes from being the top person in the group.

The Creator/Artist

For the creator/artist, joy is found in making things — whether painting, woodworking, pottery, or even cooking, knitting, and gardening. Creator/artists may show their work to others or the creation may just be for themselves — the point is to get lost in the making of something, not necessarily the value or perfection of end product. Creative play can also appear as puttering — cleaning or decorating a room, repairing something that was broken — are all forms of creation.

The Director

Directors play by planning; they enjoy planning and executing projects and events. Though many are unconscious of their motives and style of operating, they love the power to make things happen and are born organizers. At their best, you can think of someone that throws a good party or puts together a good social activity. At their worst, they can be manipulative: All the world's a stage, and the rest of us are merely players in their game.

The Explorer

As infants and toddlers, our natural instinct is to explore our world — and some people never lose their enthusiasm for doing that. Exploration becomes their preferred path to a play state — their way of provoking the imagination. Exploring can be physical — literally going to new places — or emotional — searching for a new feeling or a deepening of the familiar through music, movement, - or mental, such as researching a new subject or seeking out new points of view.

The Joker

The most basic player throughout history. A joker's play always revolves around some kind of foolishness. In school a joker might have found social acceptance by clowning around to make classmates laugh – a strategy that many keep into their adulthood.

The Kinesthete

Kinesthetes are people who like to move; some even need to move in order to think. This category includes most athletes as well as dancers and people that just like to be moving. Kinesthetes naturally want to push their bodies and feel the result. They may play football, practice yoga, dance, or jump rope to access the joy and openness of play. While they may play sports, competition is not the main focus — it is a way of engaging in movement.

The Storyteller

For the storyteller, imagination is the key to the joys of play. Storytellers feel engaged in stories and in experiencing the thoughts and emotions of characters in the story. Storytellers may enjoy writing or creating or in reading others' stories or watching movies. Performers and teachers frequently fall into the realm of the Storyteller – creating an imaginative world through acting, dance, or conveying information to others.

I'd like to pause here for a moment with all of these personalities on the screen to allow you to think about which ones you feel connected to – and I'll also point out that you can find Play Personality quizzes online, although none of them are officially endorsed by the NIFP.

While Dr. Brown believes that most people have a dominant personality, I personally think you can be more than one – kind of like one of the radar graphs you get from some other personality quizzes. I see myself in the Creator through the pattering I enjoy doing around the house; a Director through the thrill I get from tackling a problem; and a Storyteller through Sunday Services and playing Dungeons and Dragons.

Whatever your dominant personality or personalities, the important thing is to figure out where you find your joy and find more ways of incorporating it into your daily life. Which brings me to two side thoughts that didn't really fit the narrative of this morning but that I think go hand-in-hand with adding Play into our lives, so...here you go.

The first comes from the Science of Happiness course offered online by Yale that a number of us have taken as a part of an Adult RE class over the years. In addition to disproving some common misconceptions about what makes people happy, the course suggested some ways to rewire your brain to experience happiness more frequently – things like savoring experiences, having a sense of gratitude, meditating, and – the important one for today's topic – experiencing a state of "flow" in the work that you do. You know, that moment when you've been working on something

so intently that you completely skipped lunch and you don't know where the time went. People that reported experiencing flow in their daily lives also self-reported as being happier overall.

The second side note comes to us from Dan and Kathy Hislip who introduced us to the Johnson O'Conner Foundation a few years ago. The Foundation was created in 1922 based on a testing program started by Mr. O'Conner for the General Electric Company. At the time, he was looking for ways to increase efficiency in the GE factories in an effort to reduce costs. He theorized that people would be better, and more efficient, at work that was natural to their aptitudes...and it's important to highlight that these aptitudes, or natural abilities, are things we're born with, not things we've learned.

So, for instance, some people are born with the ability to perceive sound better than others. Even if you weren't born with a musical ear, you can still take piano lessons and be good at pounding out the notes, but it will probably be a challenge and you may not enjoy it.

The same is true for occupations – you might be able to psych yourself up in the morning so you can sell widgets in a widget store, but if you aren't a natural people-person, you probably don't look forward to going to work. You need someone with a natural social ability to work in a people-place, and a natural musician to be a concert violinist.

And that's exactly what the Johnson O'Connor Foundation has been doing for over 100 years - helping people identify their natural aptitudes and suggesting occupations that complement those natural abilities.

So here we have this idea of “flow” increasing our happiness and this idea of matching our occupations with what we are naturally good at...And if you are good at what you do, and you enjoy doing it, and you get lost in your work...isn't that a little bit like Play for adults?

Alright – I've been circling the runway for a bit, now it's time to land this plane... As we've seen, play is an important part of life – for all animals, young and old – and it's so important that there are entire foundations devoted to studying it.

So, from one of those foundations – the National Institute for Play - here are a few key takeaways for today:

First of all, for parents with children, it's important to realize that play for them looks very different from play for us – something I wish I'd realized sooner in life. Remember the first rule of Playtime is that it must be a self-chosen and self-directed activity. And this is one of those ah-ha moments I had while writing today's service.

When we leave our daughter, Hannah, home by herself – do you know what she does? She blasts her music and cleans the house. And as I think about the 8 Play Personalities, she is strongly an Artist/Creator – and I making the house look nice is something she enjoys doing.

But you know what she doesn't like? When I tell her to clean – because now it's no longer a self-directed, self-chosen activity. So now that we've figure that out, we're working out a system

where I can ask her to clean in a way that makes it seem like she has the option to say yes or no – although if I’m asking, she’s really not supposed to say “no”...but, we’re working on it...

Ok – second thing for you parents: if you see your child totally engrossed in their play, leave them alone unless they invite you in – don’t butt in! And if they do invite you to their tea party, remember that it’s their tea party – let them set the direction and rules for play. If they say you’re eating raw earthworm sandwiches (which makes them giggle and laugh), you say “how delicious – can I have another?” It’s just like the first rule of improv comedy – it’s always “yes...and”, never “no”.

And as you’re sipping your tea and eating your worms, enjoy the ride – don’t look for teachable moments like proper table etiquette or “do you know the history of the Chinese tea trade?”. Let them just play.

Now, for everyone – not just parents – that are looking to add more playtime to your daily lives, keep in mind the five elements of play: it is self-chosen and self-directed, the activity is more important than the results, you’re setting the rules; there is some sort of creative or imaginative aspect, and you are fully engrossed in the activity (“Flow”).

With the responsibilities that come along with adulthood, it’s not always possible to hit all five of those elements at 100% all the time, but here are some tips for getting close:

First – figure out your play personality or personalities – what is it that you really enjoy doing.

Once you’ve figured that out, think of ways to incorporate more of that into your routine – but be careful. When you find an activity you enjoy doing, you have to do it for the pure enjoyment of it – you can’t be focused on the goal of enjoying it. For instance, maybe you’re a Kinesthete and enjoy playing tennis – hitting the ball, the stop-and-start of running across the court. But then you decide you want to be better at it – so you start taking lessons and practicing and focusing on getting better. Suddenly what started out as being fun has become work. Whatever activity you find that gets you into a state of play, enjoy it for what it is – don’t worry about being good.

Another tip I found very inciteful is finding new approaches to a favorite activity because, sometimes, as we get older, the things we used to enjoy just aren’t as easy for us. And for this, I’d like to share an excerpt from a New York Times opinion piece by author Jennifer F. Boylan,

“...biking has always been my favorite form of exercise. In part it’s because I like the solitude of riding, especially on the remote trails where I take my mountain bike. [But] cycling, like everything else, has gotten harder as I’ve grown older. For much of the year, I live on a dirt road at the bottom of a mile-long hill, and some days I just don’t have the energy to make the ascent. Last summer, I was on my bike a total of five times.

“Since I got [an] e-bike, though, I’ve been riding 15 and 20 miles a day, four or five days a week. It’s been life-altering, not just making me fitter, but also raising my spirits.”

So, I'll close this morning with words from "Pondering Playtime" a sermon delivered by Rev. Mark Harris in 2013, one of the original sermons that started me down this morning's rabbit hole...he says:

...Summer reminds us of the soul's need for free play. Warm breezes remind us that our sails need to be filled. Cool water tells us that a refreshing swim will renew us. Badminton nets and croquet mallets are testaments that our bodies can't see straight or hit in a line, but they love being with others laughing and enjoying the evening's balmy twilight. We become separated from life joys when we neglect being playful with our bodies. Summer is a time to open all the windows of your being and join in the dance of life. There is an invitation to play that we should not turn down. It is not counting the miles or the pounds, it is counting clouds in the sky and seeing and discerning their shapes.

May each of us have a life that balances work and play, may we pay attention to the little details and play enough to see the dancing leaves on the tree that move in rhythm with our souls, and may we dance with the music of our lives, feeling the wind on our face, and the water rushing between our toes.

May it be so.