



Touchstones Project

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Play

Wisdom Story



“taking care of or cultivating.” These meanings create a certain ambiguity that seems well-suited to playing since it can involve imagination, adventure, make-believe, amusement, and more.

As a species, we evolved from *homo erectus*, the upright human to become *homo sapiens*, the wise human. In his 1938 book, the Dutch historian and a founder of modern cultural history, Johan Huizinga, called us *homo ludens*, the playing human. Despite the role and importance of work, Huizinga asserted that play is fundamental to being human and has permeated all cultures since the emergence of our species. His insight, however, was not new. The 1659 collection *Proverbs in English, Italian, French, and Spanish*, compiled by Welsh historian James Howell included this bit of wisdom: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

Play is crucial in mammal and human development. The *National Institute for Play* reports that play is a subject of research and study in 20 scientific disci-

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The Way of the Otter

Julie Simon, adapted



Daniel firmly grips his paddle and pulls hard against the water. He watches as the paddle tip dives below the surface, then leaves behind a tiny whirlpool as the paddle rises above the water. The kayak glides forward. He peers into the tall cattails arching above the sides of the kayak and scans for mud chutes. A light breeze moves his hair back from his eyes. But he cannot see the banks at all in the dim dawn light.

They paddle on and soon emerge from the cattails and reeds of the marsh channel, into a small open stream. The sun climbs and glows up over the horizon. Now Daniel can see muddy, grassy chutes among the roots and bushes covering the banks of the stream.

“Mom, over there,” he whispers, pointing to some marshy grasses across from the second chute. “We can wait over there. If we’re quiet, they won’t notice us.”

They slowly paddle the kayak to the spot Daniel has suggested, backing it in so they can look out at the mud chute, undetected among the grasses. Then they wait—quiet and watchful—breathing in

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Introduction to the Theme

Summer is a playground of possibility filled with picnics, swimming, catching fireflies, gardening, sandcastles at the beach, lemonade stands, baseball, camping, kite flying, gazing at clouds and stars, mountain climbing, campfires with roasted marshmallows, fishing, hiking, 5k races, biking, and so many more outdoor activities. And all of these can be part of what we call play.

The etymology of the verb “to play” is complex, with roots in five Northern European languages. The Old English *plegan* or *plegian* meanings include “amuse oneself, exercise, frolic, and engage in children’s play.” The Middle Dutch *pleyen* meant “to rejoice, be glad.” And the German *pflegen* had the sense of

Play & Regeneration

The process of regeneration can involve significant effort. This is especially true in the case of grief, wintering, resilience, and reconciliation, but regeneration can also be pursued through a lightness of being as demonstrated in play. We can lose ourselves in play, and it can bring laughter and joy. Extolling the healing power of play, Kayti Christian writes, “Not only does play help us handle stress, but it can also heal us from exhaustion and burnout.” Play is time out of time. It is an opportunity to find respite from the duties and burdens that can weigh us down, and that can be energizing. The positive attributes of playfulness can contribute to regeneration by helping us find balance and possibility in life

A Theme-Based Ministry Project

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Regeneration

Juggling a Rock

(Continued from page 1) **Wisdom Story**
the moist air. Daniel is prepared to wait the whole morning—or longer—if need be. He is an experienced otter spotter.

As they wait, Daniel remembered when he first learned about river otters. He was five or six, and his mother gave him a book for his birthday. It was *My Little Book of River Otters* by Hope Marston. He asked his mother to read it to him so often that he memorized the words. That book led him to learn as much about river otters as possible. While he knew that otters loved to play, he realized that young otters developed essential survival skills by playing, like how to hunt for food. In addition, playing with rocks improved skills like opening mussels and clams. Playing also helped strengthen their bonds with other otters. Daniel loved his kayak trips with his mother to watch the otters. He often imagined that he was playing with them.

On this morning, he did not have to wait very long. Three river otters scampered along the bank. They have long, slender, brown, fur-covered bodies, with long narrow tails, and cute faces with long whiskers. One is much bigger than the other two. A mom and her two pups are out looking for breakfast. They slide down the mud chute into the stream unaware that they are being watched. Daniel is excited but he stays quiet, hardly breathing with delight.

The otters dive underwater looking for small fish, clams, and crayfish. They each find a meal and climb up the bank to enjoy it. Then the otters slide back down the chute and dive for more food. One of the pups must be full. He quickly emerges from under the water with a rock instead of a fish, flips onto his back, and tosses the rock between his front paws. He looks like he is juggling.

Daniel can barely keep back his giggles. But he is hoping for even more fun. Sure enough, after the other pup eats her fill of fish, she joins her brother, juggling two rocks while floating on her back. Then her brother decides it's time to play slide and chase. He dashes up the bank and slides down the chute on his stomach. He lands in the stream with a

swoosh, then dives and swims up beside his sister. She rolls and drops her rocks. The two pups splash and roll across the stream. They chase each other up the bank and down the mud slide over and over again.

Eventually, Momma Otter finishes her breakfast too. She joins the pups in the slide-and-chase game. They are three otters rolling and splashing and frolicking in the water.

Finally, Daniel can no longer contain his laughter. He giggles through his fingers. The otters stop and look over at the reeds where Daniel and his mom are hidden. Then they scramble up the bank and disappear into the shrubs. Daniel sighs a tired, contented sigh. Now he will go have his own breakfast. He has seen the play of the otter.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/wonder/session10/otter>



Family Activity:

Visit an Aquarium

If you have an aquarium near you, see if they have a habitat for river otters. Visit if they do. If not, take a virtual visit at the *Tennessee Aquarium* in Chattanooga and watch their *River Otter Habitat* live at <https://tnaqua.org/animal/north-american-river-otter/>

Family Activity:

Read about River Otters

See if your local library or school library has books about river otters. If they do, read some of their books together. If not, consider buying *My Little Book of River Otters* by Hope Irvin Marston, author and Maria Magdalena Brown, illustrator. You can watch a reading of the book at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWAUgmyIE2Q> (12:16) and learn more.

Play Must Be Free

Deep Play

Diane Ackerman



Why play at all? Every element of the human saga requires play. We evolved through play. Our culture thrives on play. Courtship includes high theater, rituals, and ceremonies of play. Ideas are playful reverberations of the mind. Language is a playing with words until they can impersonate physical objects and abstract ideas. ...

It's so familiar to us, so deeply ingrained in the matrix of our childhood, that we take it for granted. But consider this: ants don't play. They don't need to. Programmed for certain behaviors, they automatically perform them from birth. Learning through repetition, honed skills, and ingenuity isn't required in their heritage. The more an animal needs to learn in order to survive, the more it needs to play.... What we call *intelligence*... may not be life's pinnacle at all, but simply one mode of knowing, one we happen to master and cherish. Play is widespread among animals because it invites problem-solving, allowing a creature to test its limits and develop strategies. In a dangerous world, where dramas change daily, survival belongs to the agile not the idle. We may think of play as optional, a casual activity. But play is fundamental to evolution. Without play, humans and many other animals would perish.

The world of play favors exuberance, license, abandon. ... [In it,] selves can be revised.

Above all, play requires freedom. One chooses to play. Play's rules may be enforced, but play is not like life's other dramas. It happens outside ordinary life, and it requires freedom.

Source: *Deep Play* by Diane Ackerman

Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." Pablo Picasso



Day 2: "Children who play creatively find multiple uses for objects. They can transform a blanket into a tent one day and a cave the next. A stick can be a magic wand, a sword, a lightsaber, or a mast for a schooner." Susan Linn

Day 3: "Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood." Fred Rogers

Day 4: "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul." John Muir

Day 5: "Play is the foundation of learning, creativity, self-expression, and constructive problem-solving. It's how children wrestle with life to make it meaningful." Susan Linn

Day 6: "Play is the primary way children were designed to learn." Kathy Hersh-Pasek & Roberta Golinkoff

Day 7: "The drive to play freely is a basic, biological drive. Lack of free play may not kill the physical body, as would lack of air, food, or water, but it kills the spirit and stunts mental growth." Peter Gray

Day 8: "Culture arises and unfolds in and as play." Johan Huizinga

Day 9: "The world of pretend play is one in which children can be free to express themselves, their ideas, their emotions, and their fantastic visions of themselves, of other people, and of the world." Sandra Russ

Day 10: "The imagination is an essential tool of the mind, a fundamental way of thinking, an indispensable means of becoming and remaining human." Ursula K. Le Guin

Day 11: "To the art of working well a civilized race would add the art of playing well." George Santayana

Day 12: "Play matters because people matter. It reminds us of our interdependence and gives us a chance to really see

other people. And in turn, to be really and truly seen." Jill VIAlet

Day 13: "Creative people are curious, flexible, persistent, and independent with a tremendous spirit of adventure and a love of play." Henri Matisse

Day 14: "Play is hard to maintain as you get older. You get less playful. You shouldn't, of course." Richard Feynman

Day 15: "Creativity and the world of the imagination—the beauty of what we see as a child and the kind of play that we experience as a child—can be a way for us to survive tough times." Diane Paulus

Day 16: "The very existence of youth is due in part to the necessity for play; the animal does not play because he is young, he has a period of youth because he must play." Karl Groos



Day 17: "A child who does not play is not a child, but the man who does not play has lost forever the child who lived in him." Pablo Neruda

Day 18: "It is in playing, and only in playing, that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self." D.W. Winnicott

Day 19: "When children pretend, they're using their imaginations to move beyond the bounds of reality. ...A small child can be a superhero." Fred Rogers

Day 20: "Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play." Johan Huizinga

Day 21: "The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery." Erik H. Erikson

Day 22: "Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play.... We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play...it arises in and as play, and never leaves it." Johan Huizinga

Day 23: "It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them." Leo F. Buscaglia

Day 24: "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." George Bernard Shaw

Day 25: "Play and playful forms of activity potentially lead towards increasingly complex forms of knowledge, skills and understanding." Elizabeth Wood

Day 26: "Give childhood back to children: if we want our offspring to have happy, productive and moral lives, we must allow more time for play, not less." Peter Gray

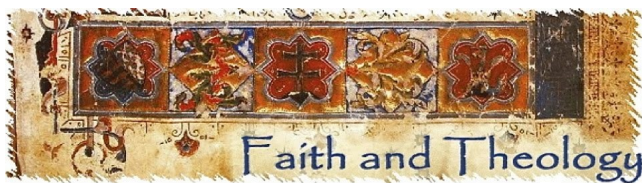
Day 27: "It's the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives." Fred Rogers

Day 28: "Rest until you feel like playing, then play until you feel like resting, period. Never do anything else." Martha Beck

Day 29: "I will not play tug o' war. I'd rather play hug o' war. Where everyone hugs instead of tugs, Where everyone giggles and rolls on the rug, Where everyone kisses, and everyone grins, and everyone cuddles, and everyone wins." Shel Silverstein

Day 30: "Play is a divine quality that you can bring to anything, an attitude and a presence rather than a defined activity. When play is free, and not choreographed by some existing rules and regulations, it is ambiguous, exciting, risky, and open to possibilities." Robert A. Johnson

Day 31: "The poet within us loves much of what the child loves: questioning, taking risks, imagining, exploring new possibilities, hugging life, playing!" John Fox



The Good-for-Nothing Sabbath

Alan Watts wrote, "It is interesting that Hindus, when they speak of the creation of the universe, do not call it the work of God, they call it the play of God, the *Vishnu-līlā*, *līlā* meaning 'play.' And they look upon the whole manifestation of all the universes as ...play, as a sport, as a kind of dance...."

This Hindu characterization of God is clearly at odds with Jewish scripture, which portrays a God of wrath. The God of the prophets, however, is not the God of creation. In his book, *The Christian at Play*, Robert K. Johnston explores different theologies of play, including one by Sam Keen, who wrote, *To a Dancing God*, and another by Jürgen Moltmann, author of *Theology of Play*. Johnson writes that for Moltmann, in the act of creation, "God 'played' meaningfully and freely with his own possibilities, not needing to be productive but demonstrating the wealth of his riches joyfully, according to his own good pleasure." Brendan McNerny concurs, noting that creation was the result of divine playing.

Genesis 1:1 to 2:2 described the six days of the myth of creation with "And God saw that it was good." Then, on the seventh day, God rested. This seventh day became the fourth commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy."

Chapter 3 of *Ecclesiastes* reminds us that the requirements of time change with circumstance. So, there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance." But, the author could have added, "There is a time to work and a time to play." And this is the point of the Sabbath. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath...."

In *The Good-for-Nothing Sabbath*, Eugene Peterson, a minister, theologian, and poet, wrote that the purpose of the Sabbath was two-fold: praying and playing. He explained, "The Exodus reason is that we are to keep the Sabbath because God kept it (Exod. 20:8–11). ... The Deu-

keeping is that our ancestors in Egypt went four hundred years without a vacation (Deut. 5:15)—never a day off." Peterson

concludes, "The Exodus reason directs us to the contemplation of God, which becomes prayer and worship. The Deuteronomy reason directs us to social leisure, which becomes play."

While we should broaden prayer to encompass spiritual practice, this ancient request is to set aside one day a week for actions qualitatively different from the work-a-day world, a day dedicated to being, not doing. And the tragic response often is, "That's impossible. I have too much to do." The problem is that we have tied our worth and dignity to what we do, despite our claim that both are inherent. They cannot be increased by doing; they can only be affirmed through being. Contrast the child at play with the child in the classroom. In solitary play, there is nothing to prove. If we need a pure example of mindfulness, look no further than a child playing with some part of the universe. The classroom is a different world where the demands are external rather than internal, where everything must be tested to determine our value.

Making the Sabbath qualitatively different is acknowledging and honoring our worth and dignity. So, what does the *Good-for-Nothing Sabbath* mean? First, it means that the Sabbath is intrinsically good. It means that there is nothing you must produce. Finally, it means "being" is more than good. It's perfect.

There is more at stake here than meets the eye. The failure to keep the spirit of the Sabbath, the invocation of prayer and play, has been life-denying. In considering a theology of play, McNerny writes, "The loss of a sense of the mystery or enchantment of the world—and the divine presence in the world [whether God, Goddess, or *Giaia*]*—seems to coincide with a loss of the sense of play."*

The Sabbath is intended to be a time out of time where prayer and play can take us. It is a time to be mindful of the present moment where we are not intent on saving time but on savoring it. We may not be able to keep the Sabbath, to consecrate an entire day by savoring it,

but we can make time for Sabbath moments where we stop, pause, play, pray, and reflect. Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "The butterfly counts not months but moments and has time enough." We need these Sabbath moments, these butterfly moments in which the present moment is enough, not going faster and doing more yet living less. Henry David Thoreau lamented, "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises?" Mary Oliver



asked, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Sabbath moments can include watching a child play, savoring the taste of a peach, smelling the fragrance of lilac blossoms, walking around the yard each morning to attend to the changes in your tiny Eden, sitting in meditation or prayer, getting lost in cooking a meal, sharing stories with loved ones or friends, the joy of laughter, gazing westward as the sun sets, and writing in a journal in the evening. All of these confer the blessing of playfulness. While adults play differently than children, it is no less meaningful or magical.

In a theology of play, we must consider how well our congregations support play. While worship should consider matters of consequence, it must also, in turn, offer moments of playfulness and prayerfulness. McNerny suggests that "...Attentiveness to play in its various forms might reconnect theology to its roots—in ...liturgy, which entails ritual, but also poetry, music, even dance...." Said differently, our worship should be infused with Sabbath moments. He pushes his theology of play further, writing, "Theology...is play. Serious play, perhaps, but play nonetheless." Theology is playing with mystery and meaning.

Source: Touchstones

Playful Parenting

It can be challenging to connect with a child who is distressed because of something that happened at school. Lawrence Cohen writes, “Children don’t say, ‘I had a hard day at school today; can I talk to you about it?’ They say, ‘Will you play with me?’” And sometimes, a child remains silent. However, when a child lives in a playful home, they are more likely to reach out directly or indirectly.

Playful parenting emphasizes the importance of play and positive interactions between parents and children. Play and humor create a joyful atmosphere that promotes children’s well-being. While playful parenting can be silly, it is serious because of its importance to a child’s development, as the following explains.



Emotional bonding: Playful interactions help build strong emotional bonds between parents and children. When parents engage in play with their children, it creates a positive and loving connection, fostering a sense of trust and security.

Communication and language skills: Playful parenting provides opportunities for children to develop and enhance their communication and language skills. Children learn to express themselves, understand non-verbal cues, and engage in conversations through play.

Cognitive development: Playful activities stimulate children’s intellectual growth by promoting problem-solving skills, creativity, imagination, and critical thinking. Play allows children to explore, experiment, and make sense of the world around them. It can also help increase their attention span.

Social skills: Playful interactions with

parents and other children help develop critical social skills. Children learn about cooperation, sharing, turn-taking, and negotiation through play. Playful parenting encourages opportunities for children to practice empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution.

Physical development: Playful parenting often involves physical activities, such as rough-and-tumble play, dancing, or outdoor games. These activities contribute to children’s physical development, coordination, motor skills, and overall fitness. Playful parenting encourages children to be active indoors and outdoors.

Stress reduction: Play has a natural stress-relieving effect on children. Engaging in enjoyable and playful activities helps reduce stress levels and promotes emotional well-being and resilience.

Parent-child attachment: Playful interactions promote a secure attachment between parents and children, characterized by love, trust, emotional closeness, and a sense of security.

Sarah Moore writes, “If ‘play is the work of childhood’ (a quote by child psychologist Jean Piaget), then playful parenting is the best way we can work with our children. It’s the absolute key to cooperation. It’s speaking in their own true language; the language of their hearts and minds.”

Source: Touchstones

Family Activity: Playful Parenting

The *The Pragmatic Parent* website has an article, *25 Fun Ways to be a More Playful Parent With Your Children*, that ends with the “25 list,” but its substance is grounded in an honest reflection about why a mother was not responding to requests to play from her daughter. See <https://www.thepragmaticparent.com/more-playful-parent/>

The *Marbles Kids Museum* in Raleigh, NC, offers over 80 ways to practice playful parenting. Just click on each item to read a description of the suggestion. See <https://www.marbleskidsmuseum.org/playful-parenting-tips>

See other *Family Activities* related to the Wisdom Story about river otters on page two.

Leisure, Work, and Play

David Steindl-Rast

...Few words ...are as misunderstood as ... “leisure.” This shows ...when we speak of work and leisure as ...opposites. ...Working leisurely is no contradiction at all. ...Work ought to be done with leisure, if it is to be done well.

What then is the opposite of work? It is play. These are the two poles of activity: work and play.

Whenever you work, you work for some purpose. ...Work and purpose are so closely connected that your work comes to an end, once your purpose is achieved.



...In play, all the emphasis falls on the meaning of your activity.... Play needs no purpose. That is why play can go on and on as long as players find it meaningful. After all, we do not dance in order to get somewhere. We dance around and around. A piece of music doesn’t come to an end when its purpose is accomplished. It has no purpose, strictly speaking. It is the playful unfolding of meaning that is there in each of its movements, in every theme, every passage: a celebration of meaning.

...When our purposeful work ...is meaningful, we will have a good time in the midst of it. ...Meaningless work is a form of killing time. But leisure makes time come alive. The Chinese character for being busy is ...made up of two elements: heart and killing. ...Our very heartbeat is healthy only when it is leisurely.

...When we speak of the heart, ...life-giving leisure lies at the very center.... Never to lose sight of that central place of leisure in our life would keep us youthful.

Source: *Leisure* essay in *Selected Writings* by David Steindl-Rast

The Child Teaches the Universe How to be a Good Playmate

(Continued from page 1) **Introduction**

plines in the fields of Neuroscience, Behavioral Science, and Ethology (i.e., the study of animals) (see <https://www.nifplay.org/play-science/scientific-disciplines-researching-play/>)

Consider the following insights reported by the National Institute for Play.

Neuroscience

- ◆ Play is a part of the neurobiology of all mammals.
- ◆ Play is deeply rooted in the brain as a primary motivational drive.
- ◆ An inadequate amount of play leads to depression and can interfere with social and emotional development and learning.

Behavioral Science

- ◆ Play enhances learning.
- ◆ Play is necessary for a balanced life throughout the human life cycle.
- ◆ Severe play deprivation diminishes the development of empathy and social competency.

Ethology

- ◆ Play is a product of evolution.
- ◆ All mammals are born with the instinct to play.
- ◆ In the wild, the most playful animals in youth survive the longest as adults.

The Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, NY, also fosters the study of play. Its extensive collection includes the *Toy Hall of Fame*. In addition, the museum publishes the *American Journal of Play*, while *The Association for the Study of Play* publishes the *International Journal of Play*. This extensive research on play indicates its importance in mammal and human development.

Professor Peter Gray summarizes much of the research writing,

1. Play is self-chosen and self-directed.
2. Play is intrinsically motivated.
3. Play is guided by mental rules, but the rules leave room for creativity.
4. Play is imaginative.
5. Play is conducted in an alert, active, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind.

The point is that we don't have to teach children how to play. Playing is

hard-wired into the very being of a child because it is critical to survival.

Play is crucial to the healthy development of children. Christine Carter writes, "In addition to helping kids learn to self-regulate, studies show that child-led, unstructured play (with or without adults) promotes intellectual, physical, social, and emotional well-being. Unstructured play helps children learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, to regulate their emotions and behavior, and to speak up for themselves." The problem is that over the last 20 years, children have lost approximately eight hours per week of free, unstructured, and spontaneous play. Play outdoors has also declined.

Dee Ray, a professor of early childhood education, states, "Play is essential to education. Play is education for children." And there is no substitute. Unfortunately, sometimes this is forgotten. We look at the child playing and may think it is cute but not consequential. But all that we see are the externals. What is invisible is all that is churning in the imagination, the consideration of possibilities, the reasoning that drives what the child will try next, the frustrations that are encountered and overcome, the delight when a new idea emerges and works, the concentration and focus required, the total

are essential, but play is the superpower. Unfortunately, parents who dismiss children playing as child's play ignore this wisdom. Instead, they over-schedule their children's lives and push them to achieve academically. *Hurried Child Syndrome* occurs when parents make their children into miniature adults. The parent's addiction to success destroys all the wonder and power of childhood.

In his book, *Fates Worse Than Death*, Kurt Vonnegut wrote, "To all my friends and relatives in Alcoholics Anonymous, I say that they are right to become intoxicated. Life without moments of intoxication isn't worth a pitcher of spit, as the ...saying goes. They simply chose what was for them a deadly poison on which to get drunk. Good examples of harmless toots are some of the things children do. They get smashed for hours on some strictly limited aspect of the Great Big Everything, the Universe, such as water or snow or mud or colors or rocks or echoes or funny sounds from the voice boxes of banging on a drum and so on. Only two people are involved: the child and the Universe. The child does a little something to the Universe, and the Great Big Everything does something funny or beautiful or sometimes disappointing or scary or even painful in return. The child teaches the Universe

how to be a good playmate, to be nice instead of mean." While water tables, sandboxes, and playgrounds invite creative play, nature is the ultimate play space.

James Carse was a Professor of the History and Literature of Religion at New York University. He described himself as religious because he was "endlessly fascinated with the unknowability of what it means to be human, to exist at all." His book, *Finite and Infinite Games* is a fascinating

exploration of two ways to play in life. We are most familiar with finite games. They have rules and boundaries and are time-limited. Because they are competitive, there are always winners and losers. Infinite games, by contrast, are collaborative, and the game's purpose is

(Continued on page 8)



absorption, the continuous trial and error, the transformation of inanimate objects into magical tools and beings, the experience of timelessness, and so much more. Compare this unstructured, spontaneous play to the same child sitting in a chair in a classroom listening to a teacher explain how to do simple addition. Both

In Praise of Play

Courtney E. Martin

You've probably heard the soul-crushing statistics about how often people who get caught up in the criminal justice system end up back in prison after release.



...So, what does it take to help young people have a successful transition into the civilian world?

It's a question that design firm IDEO and ...the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation asked ... people currently in prison and those who had been out for a while....

...One of the things they expressed needing might come as a surprise; ...they needed to learn how to have safe and legal fun. They needed ... "positive play."

Truth is, "positive play" is not just challenging or necessary for young people who have experienced jail time. ...All of us need healthy go-tos in times of emotional fragility or boredom. ...As small children we have great instincts about how to fill our time ...with exuberant physicality and artistic creation and scientific exploration....

As insecure teenagers, idle time easily becomes testing ground. What we do with our time suddenly feels like a statement about our status in the world....

...People who devote real time and energy to playing ...let their curiosity, not their egos, lead ...to having fun.

...What unites these people is a sense of playfulness.... ...They learn something about themselves that those of us who endlessly complain about being "too busy" ...do not.

...Many of the guys ...interviewed told them that "idle time is the enemy." Without the socialization or skills to fill our hours with play, there is a danger we will fill it with trouble or ...fill it with, well, filler. ...Instead, when we play, we ...are open to the full range of life's pleasure and surprise.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/courtney-martin-in-praise-of-play-and-idle-time/>

Go Play

Play is essential for children. It also promotes wellness in adults. Play answers many questions about what it means to lead a good life as an adult. Some benefits are similar to those experienced by children, while others reflect the challenges of being an adult.

◆ **Stress?** Stuart Brown writes, "Those who play rarely become brittle in the face of stress or lose the healing capacity for humor." Play provides a much-needed break from life's daily stresses and responsibilities.



◆ **Problems?** Karl Popper concluded, "All life is problem-solving." Play helps adults think outside the box, explore new ideas, and engage in imaginative thinking to pursue innovative solutions to problems.



- ◆ **Mindfulness?** For Ellen Langer, "People are at their most mindful when they are at play." Play activates various parts of the mind and stimulates memory, attention, and creativity.
- ◆ **Connections?** Emerson wrote, "It is a happy talent to know how to play." Play provides opportunities for adults to connect and bond with others. Team play can foster social interaction, strengthen relationships, and build community.
- ◆ **Health?** Engaging in playful physical activities promotes physical fitness, flexibility, balance, and coordination. Brené Brown reminds us, "Rest and play are as vital to our health as nutrition and exercise." Play can boost energy levels, improve mood, and improve overall well-being.
- ◆ **Emotions?** Someone said, "The body heals with play, the mind heals with laughter, and the spirit heals with joy." Playfulness can bring joy, laughter, and a sense of freedom and provide emotional release.
- ◆ **Growing?** George Bernard Shaw wrote, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." Play fosters personal growth, self-reflection, and a sense of fulfillment and keeps us young.
- ◆ **Balance?** Robert Fulghum asks us to "Be aware of wonder. Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing

and dance and play and work every day some." Incorporating play into life helps maintain a healthy work-life balance. Taking breaks for playfulness and leisure activities can improve productivity, prevent burnout, and enhance overall satisfaction with work and life.

When life overwhelms us, may we accept the invitation to "Go play!"

Source: Touchstones

Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion

Play

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: "...We misunderstand play itself, casting it as exuberant, silly.... But play is serious. Play is absolute. Play is the complete absorption in something that doesn't matter to the external world, but which matters completely to you. ...Play is a disappearance into a space of our choosing, invisible to those outside the game. It is the pursuit of pure flow, a sandbox mind in which we can test new thoughts, new selves. It's ...symbolic living, a way to transpose one reality onto another and mine it for meaning. Play is a form of enchantment." *Katherine May*

Chalice Lighting: (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud the wisdom story on page 1.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: "Deep play is the ecstatic form of play. In its thrall, all the play elements are visible, but they're taken to intense

and transcendent heights. Thus, deep play should really be classified by mood, not activity. It testifies to how something happens, not what happens. Games don't guarantee deep play, but some activities are prone to it: art, religion, risk-taking, and some sports.... Deep play always involves the sacred and holy, sometimes hidden in the most unlikely or humble places...."

Diane Ackerman

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. How did you play as a child?
2. Looking back, do you have any special memories of play in childhood?
3. How much time did you spend in nature? What memories and meanings stand out from your time in nature?
4. Were there moments that you would describe as infinite play?
5. What messages did you get as a child or teenager about doing versus being?
6. How have you negotiated doing and being as an adult?
7. How have you dealt with life-work balance? What role, if any, does play contribute to this balance?
8. How do you cultivate playfulness in your life?
9. What are the benefits of play for you?
10. What playful activities remain in your bucket list, if any?
11. What do you make of Sabbath-keeping and/or Sabbath moments?
12. In what ways does your congregation promote playfulness?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice: (Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words: (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*
Rev. Philip R. Giles



Play Infinite Games

(Continued from page 6) **Introduction**

to continue playing. The rules of an infinite game are changed in real-time to prevent anyone from winning and to bring as many people as possible into the play. The point is not to win; the point is to play. Absent adult involvement, children will usually choose to play infinite games.

Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Owen-Towle writes, "Of all the animal species we know, the human appears unique in its capacity to continue play into adulthood. An insect rarely plays; mammals and birds play hard as youngsters, yet lose some of their playful edge in later years. But we adult humans, well, we can play right up to death... indeed play with death itself."

Marianne St. Clair adds, "We are hard-wired as adults to engage in play, and it is crucial to our vitality to spend time with play each day." She suggests that play can inspire you to think differently; bring joy into your life; reduce stress; increase longevity; reduce struggle, conflict, and worry; increase your sense of lightness; stimulate the imagination, curiosity, and creativity; soften the heart; enhance energy; and provide an opportunity to take risks. Given all of these benefits, you would think we would prioritize play, yet, too often, play is pushed to the margin by things that appear more urgent and worthwhile.

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat write, "Coyote. Nasrudin. St. Francis and his order of Jesters of the Lord. Zen masters. Taoist sages. Hasidic storytellers. Clowns and performance artists. Such prophets—and all the spiritual traditions have them—encourage us not to take ourselves too seriously. ...To our sensible selves, their actions seem silly, shameless, even shocking. But they have an important role in the spiritual life. They carry the banner for the spiritual practice of play." We would be wise to play like them.

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