

The Spirit of Fun

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Giving a sermon on fun—there's a daunting proposition. For the last few weeks, I've had trouble believing I'm the one who proposed it. What if it's too early and no one's in the mood for fun? What if I'm the one not in the mood for fun? What I consider fun, might not be your idea of fun. I like to play Scrabble. You might think of Scrabble as torture. I know that there are people who enjoy skydiving and bungee jumping, but I'd rather go to the dentist and have my teeth drilled.

The study of play is a relatively new study. Amazingly, Sigmund Freud did not write about play other than to give an account of his eighteen-month-old grandson. It has been theorized that he didn't explore play because he wasn't a particularly playful man. The clinician Erik Erikson wrote that play is an important part of an adult's life. In 1972, Erikson remarked that play is an important part of a child's development, but he did not find it a crucial part of an adult's life. Erikson said that, "The adult who is playing in a sphere set aside for 'play' is not comparable to a playing child; wherefore he often seems to be playing at playing."⁴

In Greek, the words for "play" and "education" are both derived from the word for "child." The assumption, I imagine, was that play and education ended when your childhood did. When you are a child you play. When you are an adult, you compete. We can see this etymology become concrete in the Olympic Games and other competitions of ancient Greek culture. We behave similarly in our culture. Playing is for children, professional sports are for adults.

In the 1600s, children were just starting to be seen as separate and different from adults. In the Middle ages, the high birth rate and infant mortality rate meant parents didn't get too attached to their children—and they weren't seen as important. The children who did survive left home early. Because of this, children had a certain invisibility, allowing them to mix with adults and play with them. In that era, there was little difference between adults' and children's play. But in the 17th century, the family unit as we know it today, started to develop in royalty and the upper class families. Children were kept in the house, removed from the day-to-day activities of adults. As the two groups, children and adults, separated, children had less freedom and adults had fewer models of play. This trickled down to the middle and lower classes by the 18th century. If you look at paintings of the 17th century, you'll see children in bars and in the

streets, mingling with adults. Gradually, children became part of their families and schools and less a part of the rituals, celebrations and daily life of the bars, inns, marketplace and streets of the town. Adult games, which had once belonged to everyone, moved to rural areas and then to the realm of children. Many communal rites became games. Historian Phillipe Ariès⁵ states that childhood play develops out of rituals. Declining rites become rural play and rural play becomes the games of children over time.

I want to tell you about a series of coincidences and that links to rites declining into play. Last Easter, my family gathered at my parents' house a little north of Milwaukee. After dinner, my siblings and I and the children went outside. Someone grabbed the hula hoop from the garage. We all took turns hula hooping or attempting to hula hoop. My mother came out and saw us and exclaimed, "The hula hoop! Learning to hula hoop is my goal for this summer!" The next day I got an email from my sister saying I should write something about liturgical dance, whirling dervishes and maybe even liturgical hula. She was joking. And I forgot all about it until I started working on this service. I was writing one day and got up to take a break by taking a walk. As I passed the alley, I saw that there was a hula hoop on our fence post. Not our hula hoop, a hula hoop. The Universe had delivered a hula hoop to me. I suddenly remembered the fun we had after Easter dinner and my sister's email and on my way back into the house, I picked up the hula hoop. Later that afternoon, I went get a book I had reserved at the library. On the cover of the book was a man hula hooping. Coincidence? Two hula hoops in one day? I think the Universe was telling me to play with this sermon. Here's the amazing thing, the link: Long ago, large rings similar to hula hoops were used in dances performed by adults for religious festivals. Divine hula hoops! In the late 16th century, a Swiss student named Felix Platter wrote about the "dance of the hoops" he observed in Avignon, France, as part of the Shrove Tuesday festivities. Historian Phillipe Ariès described similar hoop dances in the remote villages of the Côte Basque. These dances went from being religious rituals to becoming a craze in 1958 when everyone was hula hooping. Now only children, and my family it seems, hula hoop.

When did we give up playing? Sometimes play comes to an end or is interrupted because of grief or trauma. When Michael Jordan's father was murdered during a robbery in 1993, he took a break from basketball.

Monica Seles gave up tennis after she was stabbed and never really got her game back. Depression can interfere with play. I have post-traumatic stress disorder and occasionally I take an antidepressant to manage the symptoms. The last time this happened, about a year and a half ago, I felt my sense of humor dried up and blew away. Doing things I used to enjoy, things that always gave me pleasure seemed to merely allow me to maintain an evenness of spirit. I never seemed to be able to go from the plateau to a point of spirited fun. I'm grateful for the hula hoop, which is

now in my living room. Other times, play becomes work and we have to find new ways to have fun. Joe Montana left football in 1995 saying he had decided to quit the game when “it felt too much like work.”

Do you remember fun? Or do you work so many hours that you have no time for recreation? Do you put it off? “This weekend I’ll do something fun. Oh, wait, this weekend is already booked. Ok, after the holidays…”

Or are you too compulsive to play—a fun time is alphabetizing the refrigerator. We know that in America, work has become too much like work. Americans are working more than ever. We’re working more than any other nation. Our lives are being swallowed up by work. The average American is putting in fifty to sixty hours a week and when asked, “How are things at work?” the typical answer includes the words “burnt out.”

Workers in Japan were once the industrialized world’s most overworked. Americans now work two weeks longer than our Japanese counterparts and two months longer than the Germans. Americans average a measly nine days a year vacation and those days are not guaranteed by law. Your vacation time is at the whim of your employer. That is, if you dare to take your vacation days. And if you do dare, you probably take work with you, leave your cell phone number with the office so that they can reach you and check your email everyday. When my children were younger, I had to save my vacation time to stay home with them if they got sick. Forget going to Paris or the Grand Canyon or even the Wisconsin Dells, I didn’t get to vacate anywhere. It’s a myth that having more vacation time would hurt productivity. We are the most productive nation, but we’re not much more productive than the Germans, the difference is negligible, and they’re able to crank it out in two months less work. It’s said that no one looks back on their life as they’re dying and wishes they had spent more time at the office. We even sleep less than ever. The National Sleep Foundation, found nearly one-third (31%) of adults got less than seven hours and as much as 31% got six hours or less sleep on week days. Only slightly over one quarter (28%) of adults get the recommended eight hours sleep.⁶

Do we think work is necessary and play is unworthy of serious consideration? We are unable to disconnect ourselves from work and we take to our leisure pursuits with the same goal-oriented zeal. We may think we’re playing when we push ourselves on treadmills or stair steppers, but we’re not. Have you seen the path along Lake Michigan on a summer Saturday or Sunday? It’s packed with people jogging, rollerblading and biking, dressed in their fashionable spandex outfits, with all the right accessories. Are they having fun? It may bring them satisfaction, but amusement? And yet, if you asked them what they do for fun, they would probably mention jogging or rollerblading or biking. I’m not saying these activities can’t be fun. If they include spontaneity, novelty or playfulness they can be very fun as well as physically satisfying. But the majority of us are merely being efficient, getting 30 minutes of cardio in while we’re

pretending to playing.

Psychiatrist Lenore Terr, in *Beyond Love and Work*, Why adults need to play, says, “Play permits us emotional discharge without huge risk. Our cares, worries, sadness, secrets, are released. Our tensions are built into our play, but unlike the direct discharges produced in the sexual act or in battle, the release of play is a more prolonged, more subtle, less the sought-after, ultimate goal. Laughing, hitting a ball, pinching back spent flowers, moving our bodies around, moving our ideas around, gently teasing, playing a role—these diversions create a series of shallow, slow releases that relax us and leave us satisfied, set for another day.”⁷

What do you do to play? Do you play? Animals do. Dolphins play pranks. Did you know that? They have been known to sneak up behind unsuspecting pelicans and goose them, snatching a few tail feathers. They tease fish by pulling them backward and then letting them go and they amuse themselves by bothering slow turtles, rolling them over and over. Bear cubs play, anyone who has a dog knows that dogs play, even cats play. When one of our cats died, we had to get a kitten because our other cat was trying to make me into his play companion. He has come up with organized games with rules that he expected me to play with him every day. Play does not end with childhood in higher species of animals. Why should it for humans? When we’re children we play and ask What happens if..., Does this feel good? How do others react to it? What happens to my body if I do this? These are still excellent questions to ask ourselves as adults. They should open us up and spur us on to play.

You can work diligently at play: stand-up comics, musicians, ball players all work hard at play. But we should work diligently to play at work. Work should be fun. I was a chef for a number of years and it’s hard. You would think it would be a creative profession, but after you come up with the evening’s specials, the creativity ends. After that, you have to make each dish exactly the same way for the next five hours. It’s hot. It’s physical. It takes strength. It can be dangerous. And yet I used to say to my employees, “If you’re not having fun, you’re outta here!” And we did have fun. We pulled pranks the dolphins would have approved of, like the time someone sent back a steak and we put an old boot on the plate to replace it. Or sending the new guy to get a bottle of liquid steam and the spaghetti stretcher. We changed the lyrics of popular songs to match menu items. Eric Clapton’s song Cocaine became the Caesar salad theme song, Romaine. That’s where the creativity comes into being a chef.

Yoga teacher Danielle Levi-Alvares believes that “creativity is to take a fresh look at life, play with it.”

Listen to the language we use to describe fun: “the spirit of fun,” a

“spirited game.” There is Spirit in fun. The creative spirit flows through everything. One day last summer, I was walking in the forest preserve and I was awestruck by the limitless creativity in nature—in just a two mile path. Robins, blue jays, crows, red-winged blackbirds, black cap chickadees, finches, cardinals, mulberry trees, dogwoods, black walnuts, elms, oaks, maples, pines, and not just oaks, maples and pines, but bur oak, pin oak, black oak, black maple, silver maple, sugar maple and at least as many pines. There is an ever-changing display of flowers and no two flowers are alike. I don’t mean that wild roses aren’t like daises; I mean on a wild rose bush, each blossom is unique. I decided to invoke the Divine Spirit to awaken the creative spirit within me. We can live not just spiritual lives, but spirited lives. The exercise we did earlier is a good way to get in touch with the Spirit, what ever you may call it and then to wake it up. Ha!

All of us are endowed with creative spirit. Each of us is blessed with natural creativity. You may not believe that “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” but that first line of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible tells us something about what a great number of people do believe: God created the heavens and the earth and then a scant 26 verses later, God created man in his own image. They believe that we are creative because God created us to be creative.

When people say they’re not creative, it’s either because someone squelched their creativity or because they don’t know how to gain access to it. I started a business this summer doing art one on one with women to help them reconnect to their spirits. I had one client who I worked with over several months and I found that she was afraid of spontaneity. She wanted planned creativity! This fall, Shirley Lundin and I facilitated a class, Building Your Own Theology. One week I asked the participants to draw four Gods: the God of their childhood, the God of their teen years, their concept of God when they became a UU and their current idea of God, if they had one. Can you guess what response people gave to that exercise? Draw?!! I can’t draw!

John Cleese, of Monty Python fame, co-owns a company called Video Arts. They make training films with a sense of humor. I used to facilitate a workshop on having more productive meetings and I used two Video Arts films. They’re hilarious. Cleese has found that people “need to create a little distance from the problem” in order to solve it. That distance is achieved through humor for Cleese. He also talks about the way Alfred Hitchcock creates distance from a problem. Hitchcock would interrupt writing sessions to tell stories when the writers became blocked. The break is needed because, Cleese believes, ego can get in the way of your work.⁸ I can’t draw! The conclusion is that if you play at your work, your ego has less chance to get in the way. Take a break. You can buy toys from the Sharper Image company to take your mind off thinking too

hard. These toys are designed for offices, allowing you to take a break and let creative ideas flow. Come at a problem from unusual angles. Toy with ideas, even ones that seem unusable. Play with the problem. Get your ego out of the way.

When your ego gets in the way, it's because you're striving for excellence rather than creativity. When you're looking for the one best idea rather than looking at all the ideas, you'll likely get no ideas. Blocked. This is the concept behind brainstorming. Each participant in a brainstorming session throws in their ideas and no one passes judgment. Ideas are generated until no one has any ideas left.

This is also the concept behind Bad Art. When we set our egos aside and simply create, we experience flow. We're in the zone. Art becomes a joy. Filmmaker and performance pioneer Jack Smith said, "If you make perfect art you will be admired, but if you make imperfect art, you will be loved!" Bad Art is a liberation delivery system. It doesn't mean low expectations, it means no expectations. That allows creativity to flow. Jon Spayde, who with his wife Laurie Phillips, started the Bart Art movement says, "Only boldness counts—and, we say, if you can't be bold, at least be bad."⁹ Bad Art is best done in a small group so that you have support to let yourself go. Make a wild collage. Finger paint. Write a silly poem or fairy tale. Only boldness counts.

Dr. Lenore Terr, again in *Beyond Love and Work*, says, "We know we are playing when we are suddenly removed from all cares and worries. We know because afterward we feel cleansed and refreshed, despite tired bodies, aching muscles, our sleepiness. The interlude has been a healthy one. It takes place entirely outside, or at the very edge of, our drive for personal success or survival. Play is disinterested, removed."¹⁰

If you don't remember how to play, come on over to my house. I now have a hula hoop in my living room.

1 <http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?45442B7C000C07040D75>

2 Cameron, Julia, *God is No Laughing Matter*, New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam 2000

3 Adapted from Sonia Choquette and Ron Roth (Roth, Ron, with Occhiogrosso, Peter, *The Healing Path of Prayer: A modern mystic's guide to spiritual power*, New York: Harmony Books, 1997)

4 From Erikson's lectures at Harvard, *Toys and Reasons: Stages in the Ritualization of Experience*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1977

5 Ariès, Phillipe, *Centuries of Childhood: A social history of family life* (1960) New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962

6 <http://www.sleepfoundation.org/publications/1998poll.cfm#3>

7 Terr, Lenore, M.D., *Beyond Love and Work: Why adults need to play*, New York: Scribner, 1999

8 From *Laughter Is Good Business*, an interview by R. Lane in *Business News*, summer 1996, pp14-19

9 From *The Miracle of Mediocrity*, Nothing lifts the spirits like making bad art, by Jon Spayde, in *Utne Reader*, March/April 2001

10 Terr, Lenore, M.D., *Beyond Love and Work: Why adults need to play*, New York: Scribner, 1999