

**Play**  
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People do it. Birds, elephants, octopus, rats, and even insects do it. What you ask? They play. We play. Whatever the differences are between us, I can say with some confidence that we've all played. I'm going to ask us all to pause for a moment, to take a breath, and maybe to close your eyes, and then ask you a few questions. What are your favourite memories of play? Where you alone or with someone else? Were you moving your body or were you quite still? Have you all got a memory yet? What were you playing?

Invite people to put responses in the chat.

That was quite lovely from my place here, watching my screen. I saw smiles, and thoughtfulness, and even some sadness on your faces. What I learned as I watched your faces is that play is important to you. I know it is important to me.

What is play anyway? We all have some idea of what we like to play, and we do like to different things. Play is something we do, because we want to, because we like to. We don't play to achieve something, or to learn something – though we might achieve something or learn something in the process. Play offers a sense of engagement, it takes you out of time. And the act itself is more important than the outcome. When we play we focus on being, rather than doing or achieving and in those moments, there is so much of value happening. When we play with one another we practice empathy, how to communicate with others, and how to adapt to the situation we are in. Play is not something we do with a specific end in mind, but there is a lot happening.

In fact, study after study indicates the importance of play, most particularly on the wellbeing of children, but also on the wellbeing of adults. Play is good for us, and it is fun too. I think that is a winning combination. Of course, we can't play all the time, but maybe we can bring some of the flexibility and open-mindedness and curiosity that often accompanies play to other areas of our lives. I think Mary Poppins was on track when she sang:

In every job that must be done  
There is an element of fun  
You find the fun and snap!  
The job's a game

And every task you undertake  
Becomes a piece of cake  
A lark! A spree! It's very clear to see.

We know this, but the truth is that many adults get out of practice. We know play is important for children, but all of us need to play.

Even though we are busy with everyday responsibilities and schedules, it is important to carve out time for leisure — if not daily, then at least throughout the week. Research shows that being playful is a key way to get more out of life. In her book “Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has The Time,” one of the things Brigid Schulte examines is research about the science of play and why it’s what makes us more whole.

Play empowers people to be flexible thinkers, creative, young-at-heart and free-spirited. It provides an opportunity for pure enjoyment and doesn’t need structure. Play is free-flowing fun that unleashes our imagination.

If we let it, play can transform our attitude and allow us to enjoy life more fully. There is a saying that play is a child’s work. But that can be true for adults as well. So how do we get back into the practice of play. As children we didn’t need to be deliberate about play, it just happened. Here are some suggestions from an article on adults and play.

- Appreciate playtime – whether it’s alone or with other adults or children – you may need to remind yourself that play is worthy of your time and attention. Pay attention to what is around you, with a special focus on things that make you smile or laugh,
- Try new things and experience the unexpected,
- Participate in a variety of arts/sports/activities whenever you can to expand your horizons.
- Sing and dance just for the fun of it.
- Watch children at play, and let yourself enjoy their creativity.
- Plan to make play part of your day, whether it is indoor or outdoor, solo or social, active or quiet.

Sometime ago I learned that a longtime friend of Gary and I would, every evening at the dinner table, be asked by his parents, “What did you accomplish today”. Not, what did you do today, not what did you learn today, not what did you think about today, but what did you accomplish today.

I find that question, at least in daily repetition, sad. The implicit message I hear in it, is ‘you are judged worthy by what you do, not who you are’. It doesn’t leave any room for valuing ‘just being’.

Those sorts of attitudes persist. Many of us, as we grew, stopped playing, or at least as much. We became more focussed on what we needed to accomplish that what brought us joy, than what helped us feel more fully ourselves. In spite of the reminder “All work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy”, many of us learned to feel that play was a waste of time, not important. The fact that sloth was named a deadly sin probably hasn’t helped either. But I have learned something about the definition of the deadly sin, sloth. It

seems sloth being named as one of the deadly sins was quite probably a translation error. The idea that laziness was bad, was something I've to some degree at least, internalized. I'm lucky, my family didn't ask me, with any regularity, what I'd accomplished. I didn't grow up completely gripped by the idea that I always had to be achieving something. Nonetheless I was surprised and delighted when I learned that the original concept of sloth was not the equivalent of laziness. In the Roman Catholic Church the original Latin term for the sin of sloth came from a Greek word which means, "absence of caring". So sloth wasn't about being lazy but about avoiding that which was important. Sloth was more like apathy, and in the Roman Catholic context was understood as the sin of putting off what God asks you to do. Too much work, if it is an act of avoidance, can be understood as sloth. Too much play if it is about avoiding important work or not caring about your obligations can be sloth.

So, if sloth isn't what we thought it was, and instead is about avoiding that which requires our attention, we can begin to think about play as a spiritual practice. What looks like play, what looks like leisure, can in fact be a way for us to reconnect with those things that have a rightful claim to our attention.

Walt Whitman was making a statement about our most essential selves, when he wrote, in "Song of Myself" wrote;

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.  
I loaf and invite my soul,  
I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

Whitman helps me understand that leisure helps us care about ourselves and with the interconnected web. It is about making important and sustaining connections.

Play connects us, it engages us, it frees us from the pressing schedule and the to-do list, we like to do it, and it is pleasurable. Ironically, play sounds like something we need to do. Play invites us to invite our souls. It invites us to know more about our true nature and the true nature of the world.

What you call play might not be the same as what I call play. And that is ok. Team sports for some, gardening for some, lap swimming, reading, hammock swinging, ant hill observing, fort building, puddle jumping, singing, trombone lessons, judo and backgammon can, if they are done by the right person in the right time, with the right attitude, be play and they can be part of our spiritual practice. Spiritual practice is sometimes defined as something that helps put us, in better relationship, with ourselves,

with others and with the divine or creation. I think a lot of play completely fits that bill. Play isn't the only way, but it is, I contend, an important way.

Play invites us into a different way of being. When we play we are in the world in a way that is not about winning or losing or taking things too seriously. Maybe someone does, at least in some games, win. Maybe we learn something, maybe the garden looks better, or maybe the pianist has a greater level of accomplishment – but when we play we don't expect to arrive, or to finish. The winner today might lose tomorrow, the Bach piece we are working on will happily take more of our attention, the garden will grow, and so will the weeds, without us. When we play we abandon any fixed notion of 'done' or complete. But play doesn't let us abandon our sense of connection, it doesn't allow us to opt out, to spiritually detach. Play is an encouragement to invest ourselves where we find joy, to invest ourselves with people and activities that make us feel better about ourselves and better about the world.

When we play we explore – we explore our own thoughts, our own physical limits, we explore the nature of relationships, we explore the nature of the world. When I was a child I used to spend a lot of time in the ravine behind my parent's home. There was a small creek that ran through the ravine and my friends and I would, in the earnest way of children, work hard to dam up that creek. My friends and I would spend whole afternoons collecting stones, and twigs and mud, and then apply them to a spot that seemed suitable to us. Our play would be interrupted by the sound of our names – calling us to dinner. We'd congratulate one another, confident that we had achieved something – we had no idea why damming the stream was important, but we felt it was. The next morning after our parents released us for the day, we'd rush down to the creek, excited to see our engineering efforts. And we'd arrive, to find a soggy pile of twigs, and water burbling cheerfully over the rocks and stones we'd placed earlier. We were learning that time and streams flow on, that water was a surprising force, that the world worked in certain ways and that we were not in control.

What would a world without play, a community without play, a relationship without play, and a person without play be like? I was both relieved and horrified when I learned that children, even in the worst of places, still play. Because play is one of the ways children learn about the world, they will play. Research has shown that children in World War 11 concentration camps played games, not to escape their misery, but to mirror it. Adult may stop playing, but children, will, in spite of their circumstances, play, even the most horrific games imaginable.

When children play they explore the world. Play is exploratory. When we truly play, we are working with what is around us, with the people around us, and we are learning about, exploring the world. I was exploring the force of water, the children of 1944 were

exploring the horror in which they found themselves. Either way, play is about being in relationship with our surroundings.

At its best play helps us to enjoy one another, to bond with one another and to build the community that we will all, at some time or another need. Without it, people would be reduced to their utility. There would be no need for fun, or silliness or enjoyment, unless we had play, the antidote to being useful. I fear that without play between us, it would be very easy to question the motives of others, and that there would be a tendency to disregard relationships that didn't somehow serve us. If relationships were only about what we could accomplish and achieve together, I have a sense that our patience for the elderly, the children and those who live with disability would be reduced to something less than one based on a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of each person. When we're really playing, not competing, there is room on the team for the kid who doesn't throw so well, and there is room in this community for the person who isn't ready, willing or able to chair a committee, or to paint the hall. We learn, through play, to welcome others, and to explore the world beyond our own experiences.

And what about our relationship with ourselves. What would it look like without play? I think without the type of play we enjoy, irrespective of goals, might result in more worrying about measuring up – not all of us can know 4 languages, hold advanced degrees and play the piano. Some of us can do those things, and that is lovely. But without time in leisure, in play, and without loafing and inviting my soul I find there is a tendency to measure my worth against the accomplishments of others. When I spend time in leisure and in play I am able to recall more of that spirit of easy unselfconsciousness that I knew as a child. I think most of us are, in truth, plagued with some sense of inadequacy. But when each of us finds the thing that we love to do, that is for us fun, we can begin to appreciate our own gifts. Play has taught me that my love of mucking in the garden, splashing in the lake and thinking about how to build and strengthen community make me valuable, make me loveable and make me worthy. What invites you to remember your inherent worth?

What happens when we cultivate a sense of play as Spiritual Practice. I believe it helps us to cultivate a grateful heart, to appreciate the wonder of our life; the fact that we woke up this morning. It helps us to appreciate those who share our lives, and it helps remind us to pay attention to the world around us. By encouraging us to loosen our grip on our ambitions, and our worries, it serves as a call to trust and to gratitude. Play is, I believe, an important element in community building. When we have fun together, we are more likely to see one another, to understand and appreciate one another. I think a congregation that doesn't play runs the risk of fussing and fretting about things that aren't really, in the long run, that important. I believe play makes us better companions – it reminds us not to be so serious, so judgmental - and it makes us infinitely more interesting and engaged.

I hope you spend more time thinking about something you want to do, just for fun. Because we need it. This congregation needs it. The world needs it.

All work, no play makes each of us, make our families and communities and out world a much sadder and duller place.

Maybe you will come across some bubbles, or sidewalk chalk or some other seemingly frivolous thing in the few days. I encourage you to play – don't worry about looking silly, lets all find a few moments in the next few days to play. We'll be better for it.