

# PLAY!

Soul Matters, June 2014

## What does it mean to be a person of play?

Children's play is most often joyful, spontaneous, freely chosen, imaginative, uninhibited, and purposeless. Adults tend to play in different ways... organized sports, puzzles, card and board games. Adult play is often constrained by rules and regulations, and may involve winners and losers, even when someone is only 'playing' for their personal best. Many adults are not very good at non-serious play.

Play requires engagement. Passive amusement is something else. It may be seemingly purposeless, like watching television for hours on end, but passivity rules out play. Diversions offer a distraction from work or serious pursuits, and can be good for you, like recreation involving exercise, but they aren't play unless they are purposeless.

"Experts on the social effects of play say that people who engage in purely enjoyable and *purposeless* activities tend to be less violent, more empathic and trusting, and more adaptable to life's challenges. Unfortunately in our culture today, doing something without purpose is considered a waste of time - at least in our adult lives. But we need to engage in purposeless activities throughout all our ages and stages. Human beings are made for play. Play is the exuberant expression of our being. It points us to our true selves and is the fount of creativity and spirituality. The sages have known the spiritual value of play for eons; they have known that play keeps our search for meaning humble." ~ Kathy Tew Rickey

This month we will explore our own ability to play -- at home, at work, and in worship. When was the last time you played in the carefree manner of a child? Do you play at all? Is it fun? How can you tap into your authentic self through play? How is play vital to your spiritual fitness?

Hoping you'll play and have great fun this month.  
With love, from Rev. Beatrice

## Questions To Wrestle With:

As has become our practice, read over these questions and find the one that “hooks” you. And then let it take you on a ride. Don’t wait until the last minute to pull these questions out. Look them over early and live with them during the entire month. Tape them to your bathroom mirror. Carry them in your wallet or purse. Post them on your refrigerator door. Find a way to make sure they break into--and break open--your ordinary thoughts. Come to your meeting prepared to share which question engaged you the most and the story of where it took you.

1. What do you do for play in your adult life? How is it the same, similar to, or different from your play as a child? What experience(s) in your life do you call play? How has your sense of play evolved as you have grown through various ages and stages? How have the qualitative aspects of your play evolved for you?
2. What did you learn from the games you played as a child? Think about tag, King of the Mountain, Red Rover, hide and go seek... Did you learn win/lose competitiveness, or cooperation, or empathy for the little guy or the one who always ‘lost?’ What childhood games might be “playing out” for you in the present?
3. What in the way of play are you watching from the sidelines that you could be an active participant in? What are you missing by not actively participating? Obviously, if we watch game-playing/sports on TV or from the bleachers, there’s some aspect of it we enjoy and connect with — but what are you missing from your perch on the couch or the bench? Fresh air, exercise, and skill-building to be sure but also camaraderie, new acquaintances, and always the chance for the thrill of a personal win.
4. How and when does engaging in play give you a sense of free-spiritedness? Experts say that the most beneficial kind of play lends a sense of freedom and timelessness during the activity. Have you ever experienced this in your play? What elements of play must be present for you to have a freeing experience? Is it possible to be a free-spirit in a competitive game? Why or why not?
5. What does it look like to be a community or people of play? Have you seen videos or pictures of various Google, Inc. workplaces? If not, click on the link provided under Recommended Resources – clearly Google values play in the workplace. What, if anything, would you point to in church life that indicates our congregation is a people of play?
6. What do you have to say “no” to in order to say “yes” to more play in your life?

## Spiritual Exercise

Dr. Stuart Brown is an expert on the subject of play in the human and animal world. He says play, spirit, and character, are interdependent components of healthy human development. It's in our playing - spontaneous and joyful play - that we can experience intense connection with each other and with the divine. Brown says play is essential in developing healthy ways to respond to the complex problems of life and that having a sense of irony can help us cope with whatever life throws at us. Being deprived of play tends to make both humans and animals fixed and rigid in responding to complex stimuli; they fail to seek novelty and embrace newness, important skills for adaptation and survival.

Many forms of play can involve risk yet some risk is essential to developing a child's sense of what she can and cannot do; Brown is concerned about "sterile" playgrounds that minimize the risk of injury but don't provide the challenges necessary to gain self-knowledge and adaptability. Further, the rough and tumble play of grade-schoolers is an important part of childhood development; play at this age is non-competitive and as long as kids are having fun at roughhousing, it shouldn't be discouraged; this kind of play teaches kids their limits and boundaries with each other and will ultimately enlarge their capacity for empathy.

So what about competitive games? Can they be considered play? Brown says yes, if it's a matter of skill versus skill, a pursuit of personal best without the need for domination. It's interesting to note that there is no such thing as competition or a contest in the animal world of play. Primates have been observed to actually handicap their play; in other words, the stronger or more resourceful animal will adjust to the weaker one in order to keep the play going – no King of the Mountain for chimpanzees!

Convinced yet that we humans are made for play? **How about taking Play for a test drive with this month's Spiritual Exercise? Here's what to do - first divide a page into two columns and head one column with "Play as a Child" and the other with "Play as an Adult." Then keeping in mind the properties of beneficial play (see the box below), list first all the childhood play you can remember that qualifies, and list next all the adult play you think qualifies. When you complete both lists, see if you can find comparable activities between the two, or if you see a theme or a pattern emerging from your lists. The goal is to discover an activity**

**that can you do in your life now that puts you in mind of those freeing and joyful times of your childhood.**

**When you nail down that special activity, make a two-hour play-date with yourself and engage in it! Try to get in at least two hours of playtime and then be prepared to share your experiences, reflections, pictures, objects, or anything you want to share with your group.**

Properties of beneficial play:

Apparently Purposeless – done for its own sake

Voluntary – not done for duty or obligation

Inherent Attraction – fun, exciting, the opposite of boredom

Freedom from Time – causes you to lose track of the passage of time

Diminished Consciousness of Self – helps you forget outer self and be in the now

Improvisational Potential – invites serendipity and novelty; break from the routine

Continuation Desire – reluctance to disengage from the fun

From "Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul by Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan. Penguin: New York, 2009.

## Recommended Resources:

A Speaking of Faith interview with Dr. Stuart Brown  
<http://being.publicradio.org/programs/2009/play/>

Unlikely playmates  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iqmba7npY8g>

More unlikely playmates  
<http://hooplaha.com/2013/06/four-baby-animals-of-different-species-playing-together/>

Animals at Play  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhTi9zvGYp8>

The film Make Believe – documentary of teens competing for World Title of Teen Magicians  
<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=21126>

Spiritual practices of play  
<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/practices.php?id=24>

The importance of play at work  
<http://www.google.com/about/careers/lifeatgoogle/creating-an-office-for-work-and-play.html>

Books:

Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul by Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan

[http://books.google.com/books?id=OcpX5Dvvp2YC&printsec=frontcover&dq=play+stuart+brown&hl=en&src=bmrr&ei=esPTTazVLIvVgAej6vEt&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=book-thumbnail&resnum=1&ved=0CDcQ6wEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=OcpX5Dvvp2YC&printsec=frontcover&dq=play+stuart+brown&hl=en&src=bmrr&ei=esPTTazVLIvVgAej6vEt&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=book-thumbnail&resnum=1&ved=0CDcQ6wEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Playing by Heart: The Vision and Practice of Belonging by Fred Donaldson, PhD.  
Addresses the roots of play as a way of creating deep connection.

Deep Play by Diane Ackerman

<http://www.amazon.com/Deep-Play-Diane-Ackerman/dp/0679771352#>

A meditation on sacred play

God's Dog: Conversations with Coyote by Webster Kitchell (UU minister recently deceased)  
Available at UUA Bookstore. (Coyote Says – another Kitchell book a good portion of which is available on books.google.com)

<http://www.uuabookstore.org/contributorinfo.cfm?ContribID=684>

The UU version of the Native American trickster spirit – Kitchell's repartee with coyote is hilarious and enlightening.

From a Soul Matters Facilitator

I have a friend who always recalls the BEST day of skiing he ever had! It was not a special weekend or ski vacation when there was a perfect fresh snowfall timed just right with his planned ski trip. Instead, it was one run-of-the-mill workday morning when he woke up planning to go to work. He woke to see a perfect fresh snowfall - but not enough so that the schools were canceled and all the school kids and teachers would be crowding the slopes. An otherwise responsible engineer, he decided to skip work that day! You can tell from the excitement in his voice every time he tells the story that he had the best day playing in the snow that day! Saying "no" to work for that one day allowed him to re-experience the fun and spontaneity of playing that he had as a kid. He cherishes that experience!

When my sister had her first son, he was the first baby of the new generation for my family. Needless to say, all of us aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc, were eager to spoil him with toys, clothes, candy, etc. With his first birthday coming up, I wanted a special gift that was meaningful for me & my new little nephew. I thought about all of the expensive and extravagant toys I could buy. So what I got in the end might surprise you...a big bag of rocks!! Let me explain... My sister lives on the Erie Canal in Brockport. As soon as my nephew could take his first steps we would go for walks on that canal. And there could not be enough rocks in sight for him to throw into that canal! He just LOVED it! So my gift to him was an "endless" supply of rocks. And for that summer, every time I visited, we would fill a bucket with his birthday rocks and head up to the canal. We spent hours throwing them as far as we could, every which way we could! My family will never let me forget that I bought him a bag of rocks for his first birthday, saying "no" to all of the

conventional gifts. But I will always cherish the memories of getting my hands dusty and dirty and watching him giggle with every splash those rocks made.

#### Quotes

To play is to listen to the imperative inner force that wants to take form and be acted out without reason. It is the joyful, spontaneous expression of one's self. The inner force materializes the feeling and perception without planning or effort. That is what play is.  
— Michelle Cassou and Stewart Cubley in *Life, Paint and Passion*

When we play, we sense no limitations. In fact, when we are playing, we are usually unaware of ourselves. Self-observation goes out the window. We forget all those past lessons of life, forget our potential foolishness, forget ourselves. We immerse ourselves in the act of play. And we become free.  
— Lenore Terr in *Beyond Love and Work*

Play exists for its own sake. Play is for the moment; it is not hurried, even when the pace is fast and timing seems important. When we play, we also celebrate holy uselessness. Like the calf frolicking in the meadow, we need no pretense or excuses. Work is productive; play, in its disinterestedness and self-forgetting, can be fruitful.  
— Margaret Guenther in *Toward Holy Ground*

It is a happy talent  
to know how to play.  
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is a mystic in every one of us, yearning to play again in the universe.  
— Matthew Fox in *Wrestling with the Prophets*

“Movement fills an empty heart.” Bob Fagen

“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.”  
— Plato

“This is the real secret of life -- to be completely engaged with what you are doing in the here and now. And instead of calling it work, realize it is play.”  
— Alan Wilson Watts