

## Pure Imagination

Imagination has been our discussion and worship theme for the month of May this year, but it blends so smoothly into next month's theme of "play" that I've been having trouble keeping them apart. Imagination belongs with play and play belongs with imagination. So as we consider "pure imagination" this morning, I'd like to begin with some thoughts about play.

Experts on the social effects of play say that people who engage in purely enjoyable and purposeless activities tend to be less violent, more empathetic 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.

Let's explore how we might put more play into our lives. As we consider what constitutes our playtime, let's ask ourselves, "Is it fun and done just for the fun of it?" "Is it a freeing experience?" "Is it the kind of playing that puts us in mind of the most fun and carefree times of our childhood?"

I'd like to invite you into a moment of pure play. I've got some balloons here, and I'd like to invite you into one of the simplest games there is: just bat them around to yourselves or each other, keeping them off the ground, but picking them up when they do fall, and continuing the game.

Isn't purposelessness fun? There's not point to this!

In the current issue of the UUWorld magazine, Anthony Makar shared a reflection by Peter Gray, a Boston College psychology researcher, about watching two young girls play Scrabble. They clearly liked the basic setup of the game, but had

absolutely no interest in following the rules. He wrote that, “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 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 friends can laugh. Sometimes one would ‘challenge’ the other’s ‘word,’ asking for a definition, and the other would offer an 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?”

All this left Gray wondering what had happened to him, how he had lost the ability to play as freely as these ten-year-old girls. This felt like a loss to him, because, as he said, “play like that is what aliveness looks like.”

Gray went on to reflect that we seem to have lost touch with what it is that makes play *play*. He described five factors that the Scrabble story demonstrated. The first is that play must be freely entered into without pressure or pretense, with no sense that it’s impossible to quit. If a person feels coerced or forced, it’s not freedom and therefore it’s not playful.

The second factor is that the girls are free agents, determining their own rules and strategy, despite Gray’s protests. Play can’t be playful if people are feeling micromanaged.

The third vital factor for play brings us to this morning’s theme: imagination. He points out that “Scrabble, in conventional reality, aims at real words; but the girls aim for nonsense words that sounded real, are as long and as silly as possible and have invented definitions. In the hands of imagination, everything can be different or more than what is.”

The fourth factor is important, too. “It’s done primarily for the sake of fun. Our Scrabble-playing girls aren’t creating new words to improve the English language. They just want to make each other laugh.”

Gray’s fifth factor completes the set. He says that all genuine playfulness is completely absorbing. “When you’re playing, you are intensely focused on what’s happening in the game. Above all, you are not distressed, you are not afraid of failure, you are not distracted by anything else.

“All this is what makes play *play*. Activity that is freely entered, is self-determining, is full of imagination, is valued primarily because it is enjoyable, and is characterized by a mindset of utter absorption.”

Makar concludes that play might be useful in ways we don’t usually expect. He suggests, “If playfulness involves freedom to enter into and to leave, think of all the ways in which you might be tied to a position you can’t afford to leave, or to a marriage, or to something else.

“If playfulness involves the ability to choose exactly how you will play, think of all the ways in which people of all ages are micromanaged – at school, at work, even at home. . .

“If playfulness involves doing something just for fun, think of all the [unplayful] messages you receive about getting on track, growing up, getting a life.”

“If playfulness involves full absorption in what you are doing without any distress or pressure, just watch the evening news and allow the pain of the world to pour in and that will make you feel plenty distracted and distressed.

“If playfulness involves imagination, just think of all the ways in which the world wants you to be serious and literal. All the literalism and conservatism out there that makes religion, for example, shallow and uncreative and violent.

“If we could just flip the joylessness script for one moment.”

Flipping that joylessness script can change everything. Experts in congregational life agree that one of the signs that a congregation is in trouble is an excess of seriousness. Flipping the joylessness script into a joyful spirit of play can bring much needed lightness and laughter, especially in the most serious of times.

Spiritual practices can seem puzzling to those who feel that we need to be serious all the time. Some people even approach spiritual practices burdened with a stultifying seriousness.

I was reading Thich Nhat Hanh's book, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, the other day and I was struck by what he described as the "Three Doors of Liberation." He says, "When we enter these doors, we dwell in concentration and are liberated from fear, confusion, and sadness." Sounds good...

The first door is called, "emptiness." This is an emptiness that is not empty in the usual sense. This emptiness is like the self-forgetting we experience when we are overwhelmed by beauty in art, nature, or gazing into the eyes of someone we love. We spend so much time being so full of ourselves, our preoccupations, our concerns – this kind of emptiness invites us to lighten up and get out of our own way.

The second door is called, "signlessness." This refers to the difficulty many of us have when we try to truly observe what we're looking at. What we usually do is to begin a train of thoughts about whatever it is that we see. It means this and it means that. We then can become so intoxicated with the flow of our opinions, we often forget that they can get in the way. We can be so full of our own thoughts and opinions that we forget we've stopped observing and have started thinking. Yogi Berra once said, "You can observe a lot by just watching." But "just watching" can be a lot harder than we think.

The third door is "aimlessness." Thich Nhat Hanh describes this as, "There is nothing to do, nothing to realize, no program, no agenda. . . Does a rose have to do something? No, the purpose of a rose is to be a rose. Your purpose is to be yourself. You don't have to run anywhere to become someone else."

Emptiness, signlessness and aimlessness may sound like weird unattainable spiritual goals, but what struck me is how accurately they describe play! When we play, we're not full of ourselves, we're not looking for meaning, and there's no winning or losing – we're just enjoying play for its own sake.

And I think this is what Thich Nhat Hanh is getting at. Life itself can be playful; it can be play. We can take ourselves less seriously. We can lighten up and laugh.

Then imagination can come into our lives in an entirely new way. When we can freely express our imagination, it can enhance our lives and the lives of those we know instead of being mere escapism. If we can imagine a world of smiling, happy people who have no interest in being annoyed or criticizing one another, we can behave as though we live in that world. And if we can all imagine that together and live that way, what a peaceful and joyous congregation this would be!

I invite you to imagine something else with me – under the sea, perhaps.

I invite you to imagine with me, just for a moment, that we have been magically transported to the bottom of the ocean. The air all around and above us is water and the ceiling is the surface of the sea. Don't worry about breathing, though, our thought experiment doesn't have to take itself that seriously or go that far.

But I invite you to think of this as the bottom of the sea. I invite you to reflect on how still and peaceful the water is here, deep under the surface. The surface of the ocean is where we find all the waves, winds, and the storms. But way down here it is always peaceful and serene, undisturbed by all the activity above.

Can you feel how deep and still and peaceful this is? Can you imagine with me?

Now, can you imagine that all the stress and strain, the details, deadlines and crises of your lives are like the surface of the ocean? They're real and compelling, but only on the surface.

Now I invite you to imagine that, far within you, there are depths as deep and still and profound as the depths of the ocean. And that those depths are always available to you, no matter what is happening on the surface. This is a version of the spiritual message of all the ages: there is a place deep within each of us that's so full of peace and compassion that it cannot be lost, and that it is there, waiting for us to discover and live in a healing peace and tranquility that transcends all the storms of

the surface. They don't go away, but everything is different when we can make our connection with that place deep, deep within.

I think this is what Thomas Merton was thinking of when he said,

“The reality that is present to us and in is:

call it Being . . . Silence.

And the simple fact that by being attentive,

by learning to listen

(or recovering the natural capacity to listen)

we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness

that it cannot be explained:

the happiness of being at one with everything

in that hidden ground of Love

for which there can be no explanations. . . .

May we all grow in grace and peace,

and not neglect the silence that is printed in the centre of our being.

It will not fail us.”

May it be so.