

Holy Play
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Play..it is not something that we adults frequently give ourselves permission to do and we certainly don't think of play when it comes to our spiritual lives. Play gets relegated to the profane, not the sacred. On some level we know it is important; after all our first reading from today is from the home page for the National Institute for Play. Yes there is a National Institute for Play. We study play, we measure its benefits but how many of us truly make a play a part of our lives on a regular basis, let alone a daily basis? In addition how many of think of play being a part of our spiritual lives? We all need to play – regardless of our age. We don't need to play because it will be good for society (although it is); we don't need to play in order to make us more productive (although it might); we need to play because it is fun, we might laugh and we just might connect with that which is sacred. I believe that through play we can experience the Divine, the sacred, the holy, what is ultimate. In fact I want to make the case that play is an essential spiritual practice.

We as UU's take ourselves and our religion very seriously. This is not a bad thing. In fact one characteristic shared among UU's, many of whom come from other religious traditions, is that we examined the claims of our former faith traditions and found them wanting – we took our religious communities seriously. It shows a profound respect; we took the claims seriously, engaged with them and then decided about whether or not we could remain within the community. I examined seriously the claims of the Roman Catholic church and I could no longer accept the authority of the Pope and the Vatican, and felt that in good conscience I could not remain in that community. I knew that if I stayed I would not be honoring myself or all that I still loved and honored about Roman Catholicism.

But taking ourselves and religion too seriously is a problem as well. If we are serious all the time, then our view becomes too narrow, too confined. Not to mention that being that serious all the time is not very much fun and doesn't leave room for fun. It doesn't leave room for the unexpected and in my experience the holy, the Divine, revels in the unexpected. Stories abound in various religions and cultures about the Divine breaking through in unexpected and spontaneous ways. In fact it seems in these stories that just when someone or some group of people think they have life all figured out, that it is just then the Divine will break through with something new. Let us take the story for example of Moses and burning bush. Here is Moses minding the sheep, living his life, just going about things, thinking he has left Egypt behind for good and all of a sudden this bush appears. The bush is on fire but it is not getting burned up, he moves closer and then there is a voice telling him to remove his sandals, that the ground that he stands on is holy ground. So Moses removes his shoes and keeps listening. Then all of sudden he is off back to Egypt to speak to Pharaoh and rescue the Israelites from slavery. This is not expected, this was not in Moses' plan. The Divine broke in and then everything changed. Yet it is important to note that Moses chose to take off his sandals and he chose to return to Egypt.

There is so much richness in this story and yet as UU's we can get very caught up in, "Did it really happen?" Bushes don't have fire in them and not get burned. Hearing voices speak to you is not a good sign and Moses probably needed a good psychiatrist and a large dose of anti-psychotic drugs. The "did it really happen?" doesn't really matter. The bigger question is what does it mean? Does it mean anything to me? To us? What might this story have to teach? We need to be able to play with the text. We need to give ourselves permission to play with the text without needing to be trained biblical experts to do so. Certainly experts can help; they might have insights that will help us as we play with the text. Yet what if we just took in the story and then put ourselves in the story. Try on the role of Moses, what would you do if you saw the bush? Would you notice the bush, or in your life are you so busy, so focused on what is next on the to-do list, that you walk right by the bush? I wonder if God really chose

Moses that day or if he just happened to be the first person notice the bush. There isn't a right or a wrong here. It is a way to play...a way to play with text.

This practice of imagining oneself in the text is something I learned from the Jesuits. I went on my first silent Ignatian retreat when I was a senior at Georgetown. I spent a week in silence and each day there was a biblical text. We were to imagine ourselves in the story. We could be in the crowd or one of the characters. All of the stories that week came from Gospels and so as part of the exercise we were asked to see Jesus talking to us. It was a powerful experience. There was no right or wrong answer. It was a new way to experience the text; for the text to come alive in a new way. This practice does not have to be limited to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, many stories would lend themselves to our imagination this way. We can learn to play with the text. To use our imaginations and in order to use our imaginations, we must learn or re-learn to play.

In our second reading today, Shug tells Celie how she in the midst of all her trouble and she has a lot of trouble in her life, connects with the Divine. The Divine breaks through, not as the old white man that religion taught her about, but as the living, breathing source of life. When she realizes this, she is laughing and crying and filled with joy. The Divine, the sacred breaks through and she is transformed. Not because her life is suddenly fixed, her troubles have not vanished, but she knows herself to be a part of everything that is. She tells us that God wants us to share that. God wants us to share in God's enjoyment of Creation. Celie asks Shug if she is saying that God is vain. No she says, just wants to share a good thing. God wants us to notice the color purple in a field. God wants us to have new eyes, to enjoy creation. God wants us to enjoy life in its entirety. God wants us to play!

Play requires time and attention. It means taking time away from the to-do lists and work and obligations. Our Puritan ancestors, and we as UU's are one of the descendents of the Puritans, frowned on play and frivolity. Life was a somber affair. The Puritans banned all sorts of type of play – they didn't want any art in their buildings,

they had no theatre, no dancing, particularly on the Sabbath. They took life and religion very seriously. Our American culture has often taken a dim view of play. After all play does not contribute to the growth of the economy – unless of course you spend money to play or buy particular gadgets to play. Play is not seen as a means to progress, of getting the next best thing. Play distracts us from what we should be doing.

Play, however, is not about spending money or buying particular gadgets. In our consumerist culture, in our “work hard, play hard” mentality, one works hard in order to be able to buy the very expensive gadgets that are needed for play. One works hard in order to be able to go on that vacation to that far away place to play. Just like with Sabbath, we are being marketed “play” all the time. The reality is for most of us, we work hard, we buy the gadgets and then have to work even harder to pay for them. There is no time left to actually play! Yet play is not expensive, it does not require an expensive vacation or gadget. Play requires very little. Remember the bean bag game? It took a group of people and few bean bags; not very much, no cool new gadgets.

How many times have we heard the story about a child being given the brand new, most cool toy on the market, only to be engrossed and fascinated by the box it came in? There is a profound lesson here and also a profound sadness because for most children, it won't be too long when they will eagerly open the box, hoping for that next brand new most cool toy to be inside and the box will be rapidly discarded. Society teaches our children at a young age to want the next best thing, to play not with the box but with the expensive thing inside it. Now there is nothing wrong with gadgets and toys. I love them; as anyone who knows me can attest. I spend a lot of time playing on the computer, playing on the internet. I love gadgets! Yet if I start to believe that I cannot play or relax or have a good time unless I have that new expensive gadget, then I have forgotten what it means to play! Marketers want us to forget; they want us to believe that unless we have their latest product we can't possibly be having fun.

Play, however, is simple. It could be taking a walk in nature hoping to catch a glimpse of the color purple. Play can be a game of hide and seek. Or maybe playing catch, bouncing a ball or riding a bike. It can be playing a card or board game. One can play by oneself or with others. Play may involve losing oneself deeply into a book, a wonderful story – which brings us to one of my favorite ways to play.

This summer I have decided to re-read the entire Harry Potter series from the beginning. I am currently reading the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. I love the Harry Potter books because they transport me into a different world. As my family can attest it is often difficult to bring my attention back once I have started reading. That to me is the ultimate test of a good book...can I be lost in its pages? I relate this because in the Potter books, magic requires the use of the imagination. One of the creatures that Professor Lupin introduces to the Hogwarts students is the boggart. A boggart is a creature which lives in closets and drawers and manifests self as whatever the person who is before it fears the most. In order to get rid of a boggart one must transform the object into something ridiculous; something to be laughed at. In the books, Ron Weasley is terrified of spiders, when the boggart takes the form of a huge spider, Ron imagines the spider on roller skates, slipping and sliding all over the place. There is an important lesson here, being able to laugh at our fears, to transform them into something amusing, can help us make our fears more manageable. It can lead to new insights into how to face challenge and adversity. Play can help us cultivate our imaginations, allowing us to see new ways, new solutions.

This cultivation of our imagination is another way that play cultivates our religious life. An essential part of our Unitarian Universalist faith is to make justice in this world. Many of us were drawn into Unitarian Universalism because of the strong emphasis on and action on behalf of justice. Yet justice making requires imagination. We must be able to imagine what is not yet real. We must imagine what a just and loving world would like. We must imagine what justice looks like even when it isn't there.

One of the reasons that social problems can seem intractable is that we can't seem to find a new way to do things or see things. Failures of justice are frequently failures of imagination. One can take any number of issues, hunger, war, racism, violence and see that the people involved often cannot or could not imagine another way doing things. We need to cultivate our ethical imagination. We need to cultivate what justice looks like.

In *The Color Purple*, Shug begins a journey of imagination away from the old white man god in the sky, to seeing the Divine in everything including herself. It did not happen automatically, it happened because she noticed, she paid attention. To draw another example from Harry Potter, Harry must be able tap into his memory, a strong memory and hold it in order to produce the Patronus charm. This spell will repel the Dementors, creatures that feed off of human emotions, that make people relive the worst moments of their lives. Harry must tap into his imagination and repel these creatures that would only have him experience pain. How can we tap deeply into our imaginations, and repel the forces that would have us believe that things cannot be different than the way they are right now?

Play requires one final thing, we must be willing to risk appearing foolish. Most of us do not want to appear foolish, in fact we will do almost anything to avoid it. Yet to really lose oneself, to put oneself wholly into something is to risk looking foolish. Children are willing to risk this. They put themselves fully into the character...becoming a dragon, a fairy, a princess, a monster. They don't worry until they are older about not doing it right, about being foolish. It is simply fun to become the character, to act out the story. The spiritual journey is frequently the fool's journey. The social justice journey is also a fool's journey. For we cannot see where we are going...we cannot see our destination. Play can teach us to be foolish, to take ourselves less seriously. As I said in the beginning, we as UU's can take ourselves very seriously. There is a time and place for that but I would caution us about doing it all the time. We can be so intent on the task, on saving the world, on the seriousness of our lives and the world, that we

forget that life is not just about the problems. There is joy and beauty to be found amidst of the problems and the pain.

Think of music, the spirituals, jazz and the blues come out of the African American experience of injustice and oppression. Jazz in particular has an unexpected quality to it. A spontaneity and improvisation, in fact, a key element to jazz is improvisation. The song never sounds the same way twice. David and Felicia improvised the prelude and the story. They risked it not being perfect, of it possibly going wrong. Yet, without the risk, without improvisation and spontaneity, there would never be new music. How sad it would be if our musicians never risked getting it wrong or being foolish! So thank you David and Felicia for risking with us this morning; for playing with us this morning.

So I am going to close my sermon today by inviting you to do something unexpected. I am going to invite you to stand as you are willing and able, and take just a couple of minutes to share with someone near you your memory of play. Take just one minute to share your story and then the other person will have a minute to share theirs. I will keep the time and let you know when you should switch. We will play by sharing a part of our stories with one another.

When time is up, I will ring the gong.

Ring the gong:

May it be so.