

The Spiritual Practice of Play

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

Slightly modified from Deepak Chopra's *The Book of Secrets*

When we see a beautiful landscape,
are we able to behold beauty itself?

When we look at the vastness of the sky,
are we able to appreciate an infinity beyond?

When we watch a young child who is playing with complete focus and yet is totally carefree, do we feel a tug?

The child's innocence seems palpable in these moments.

Can we feel this innocence in ourselves?

Do we yearn to feel the same delight?

Are we able to disentangle ourselves, even momentarily,
from the encumbrances that separate us from true freedom?

The child's small body seems as fragile as a soap bubble
and yet is bursting with life itself....

Reminding us of purity, immensity and eternity.

Reading

“The Power of Play” by **Stuart Brown** from his book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*.

After five hours of driving over the tire-melting highways
of the Nevada and Utah deserts, I am beat.

My yellow Lab, Jake, shares the emotion.

He is draped across the backseat, all the air let out of him.

The last ten miles of our journey is an unpaved, rattling road up to my cousin Al's ranch, so it is half an hour more before I shut down the engine and the dust cloud that has been following us blankets the car.

Then something miraculous occurs.

I open the door for Jake and he freezes, every sense aquiver. He instantly takes in the whole scene: a bright August day, four acres of pasture, a dozen horses, my cousin Al, his four kids, and two dogs.

A light breeze rustles aspen leaves, wafting scents of hay and horses across the Utah ranch. Doggie heaven.

In half a second Jake is flying out the door, a blond blur zipping toward the pasture.

He races at full gallop one way and reverses, paws tearing up the dust in a skidding turn, then accelerates to warp speed in the opposite direction.

His mouth is agape, the corners pulled back in a canine grin, his tongue lolling out one side.

Jake blasts into the maze of animals without hesitation. I worry about how the horses will react, but they don't shy.

In a flicker the horses are jumping and gamboling.

It seems that we all—adults, kids, dogs, horses—recognize that Jake is consumed with the joy of play. All of us are caught up in the moment.

Jake initiates a free-for-all game of follow the leader. He darts from horse, to person, to dog, to pony, to person, and back to horse in an outstanding display of speed, athleticism, and pure exuberance.

Jake shoulder-checks another dog and sends him flying,

but he doesn't lose a bit of speed and the other dog
is right back up and into the chase.

The children squeal with delight and run after Jake
as he does figure eights.

The adults are soon whooping and running. . . .

The moment is captivating, gleeful,
unexpected, and short-lived.

After thirty seconds the horses scatter and the dogs lie down,
panting and cooling their bellies in the grass.

All of us feel completely exuberant.
We catch our breath and laugh.

The tension and fatigue of the drive has fallen from my shoulders.
The kids are giggling.

The rest of the day has a lightness and ease
that I hadn't felt for a long time.

“The Shirk Ethic” by Richard Gilbert

O God of Work and Leisure
Teach me to shirk on occasion,
Not only that I may work more effectively
But also that I may enjoy life more abundantly.

Enable me to understand that the earth
Magically continues spinning on its axis
Even when I am not tending the vineyards.

Permit me to breath more easily
Knowing the destiny of the race
Rests not on my shoulders alone.

Deliver me from false prophets who urge me
To “repent and shirk no more.”

I pray for thy grace on me.
Thy faithful shirker.

Sermon: “The Spiritual Practice of Play”

Her name is the Golden Eagle.¹

And, this summer, the whole town of Newville, Newfoundland—
some 40 families—came out to witness her maiden voyage.

Now, building this ship—a pirate ship, no less—
has been John Keefe’s labour of love for the past five years,
the proud culmination of both his handiwork and his imagination.

For the grand occasion of her being launched, at last, onto the ocean,
John wore an eye patch, a hook and a tri-cornered pirate hat.
He was a vision to behold.

But, his older brother Ernest wasn’t amused
and not one bit warmed by the festive mood of the crowd
that had gathered to watch the ship set sail.

With all his neighbours looking on,
Ernest “limped up to his brother’s newly minted pirate ship,
wrapped his arm around... the cable
that would pull the vessel into the Atlantic and declared:
‘You’ll have to rip my arm off before you move this boat!’”

Boys will sometimes be boys, especially when they are brothers.
But, part of what makes this story so interesting
is that John is 73 and Ernest 76.

“The brothers Keefe, who live side by side in Newville,
are embroiled in a [conflict] over a couple acres of land
left to them by their father more than 50 years ago.”

¹ Adapted from the article by Brendan Kennedy, “Arrrr! Family feud hijacks a pirate’s dream,” *The Toronto Star*, 14 July 2011.

Things have heated up between them,
because in order to reach the waterfront,
John's boat needed to cross the disputed territory.
But, Ernest refused to budge.

John's 14-year-old granddaughter, Haley, said:
"For the three minutes it would take to move that boat
you'd think he'd let him do it."

But, sadly, no.

There was a stand-off, or better, a sit-off,
as Ernest decided to plant himself in a lawn chair,
directly in the boat's path.

Eventually, someone called the police.

And, not long after, a constable from the RCMP station in Twillingate
"was dispatched to keep Ernest at bay
while the Golden Eagle crossed over the conflict zone."

At last, "John's pirate dream was almost real."

"But as one obstacle was removed, the ship met another:
the boat was about 30 metres from the shoreline when it [got]
hooked on a rock, [punching] a hole in the keel, near the rudder.

The Golden Eagle would have to wait another full week to finally set sail,
but eventually she did, and this time Ernest didn't put up a fuss.

Looking back on the whole thing,
Ernest admitted that, "things got ugly,"
but said he only wanted to settle the land issues
so future generations wouldn't squabble over them.

That's fair enough, though it's too bad
things came to such a head between these two brothers in the process.

What really struck me in hearing this story this summer, though,
wasn't so much the tensions between the brothers,
but more the story about John building his pirate ship.

He built it all by himself,
“every nail, every screw, every bolt,
every [plank] of wood...”

Ten metres long and four metres wide,
it is “equipped with a 65-horsepower diesel engine,
and... includes [all the] staples of any self-respecting pirate ship,
...a crow’s nest lookout, and of course a Jolly Roger—
the skull-and-crossbones flag—which flies high above the main deck.”

Though he’s been at this hobby of shipbuilding for some 30 years,
the Golden Eagle is by far his favourite.

The idea to build it came to him a decade ago,
when he saw a replica of The Matthew, John Cabot’s famed vessel,
when it was making a tour around Newfoundland.

He decided then and there that he wanted to build one like it.

“Despite his experience, it was no easy feat.”

John’s wife, Marie, “had a brain tumour removed in 2005
and has required almost round-the-clock care ever since.”

So, the boat had to be built in fits—
15 minutes here, 15 minutes there —
all while taking care of his wife.

His family now thinks that that ship was what kept him sane
through the incredible stress of Marie’s deteriorating health
and the many trips they made to Gander and St. John’s for her treatments.

“The boat provided [him with] an escape,” his daughter says,
and he put every spare moment he had into making it sparkle.
“That boat,” she says, “*is* Dad.”

As for the pirate thing?

John guesses that, “way back
one of [his] ancestors must have been a pirate.”

With his new ship now in the water, he's setting his sights
on some real swashbuckling of his own,
because he rightly points out
what's the point of having a pirate ship
“if you're not going to look for treasure.”

He says, with a laugh, that, “everyone thinks I'm crazy, yeah,
but now since I got it built, I think they're changing their minds.”
“There's not another boat in Newfoundland like it.”

It might be easy for us to think John crazy, too,
just a quirky guy, living out on The Rock.

But, I'm more inclined to see John as a spiritual teacher.
A Zen master of sorts.

He's on to something, and he has something to teach,
about play, about playfulness,
about how to keep your spirit alive—to passion and wonder and joy—
even when life is overwhelmingly hard,
and even when it threatens to break your heart.

We too easily, these days, think of play as the domain of children,
quite literally, as mere child's play,
as something we are supposed to outgrow as we get older.

But the need for play is an ongoing part of our lives,
and it is, I think, an essential part of our spiritual lives, as well.

It isn't a need we so much leave behind
as much as one we too often neglect,
until we lose touch with that sacred spark that play brings to our being.

Losing the desire for that spark can be one of our greatest losses,
though we may not even notice that it's gone,
or be able to name its absence.

Once upon a time, a little boy was playing in front of his house,
when it occurred to him that he had never seen
an adult playing with a red wagon like his.

He burst into tears.

When his mother asked why he was crying,
the boy said he was afraid that when he grew up
he wouldn't be able to play with his wagon anymore.

His mother assured him that when he grew up
he could, indeed, play with his red wagon, if he liked.

That quieted him for a moment.
But, then he burst into even greater sobs.

And his mother asked, "Now, what's the matter?"

And, the boy said, "I'm afraid that when I grow up,
I won't *want* to play with my red wagon anymore."²

That's the risk, right?

To move beyond the desire, or somehow think we have,
without realising that play isn't some discretionary form of recreation,
but a powerful source of creation and re-creation in our lives.³

It's about the spontaneity of spirit that engages our heart and
mind and our body in ways that enliven us, from the inside out,
renewing us and the world around us.

And, when it's missing, Stuart Brown,
that doctor with the exuberant dog,
who writes on the place of play in our lives,
says it is as if life "is a grinding, mechanical existence
organized around doing [only] the things necessary for survival."⁴

He goes on to argue that:
it's not "too much to say that play can save your life. . . .
Play is the stick that stirs the drink.

² Anthony Friess Perrino, *The Numbering of Our Days* (adapted).

³ Thanks to Robert Fulghum for the wordplay.

⁴ Stuart Brown, from his book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, p.11.

It is the basis of all art, games, books, sports,
movies, fashion, fun, and wonder—
in short, the basis of what we think of as civilization.
Play is the vital essence of life. It is what makes life lively.”

It makes us smarter and more adaptable.
It fosters empathy and understanding.
It has a biological basis that helps us to survive.
And, it “lies at the core of [our] creativity and innovation.”

In describing what the world would be like without play,
Brown says, “It’s not just an absence of games or sports.
Life without play is a life without books, without movies,
art, music, jokes, [or] dramatic stories.”

“Imagine a world with no flirting, no day-dreaming, no comedy, no irony.
Such a world would be a pretty grim place to live.
In a broad sense, play is what lifts [us] out of the mundane.
[It’s like] oxygen—it’s all around us,
yet goes mostly unnoticed or unappreciated until it is missing.”

I wonder if you find it missing from your own life?

I wonder if you play.
I wonder if you remember how to play,
and whether you recall the feeling of that spark along the way of your life,
and whether you’re familiar still with its power to make you come alive.

I love the story of the dancer Gillian Lynne,
who was the choreographer for the musicals *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*.

Growing up in 1930s Britain, she was a horrible student.
She was forever fidgeting and never paid attention to her schoolwork.
She had what we might term ADHD today.
The officials in her school told her parents that she was mentally disabled.

Things had gotten so bad that one day,
“Lynne and her mother went to see a specialist,
who talked to Gillian about school
while the girl sat on her hands, trying [hard] not to fidget.”

After twenty minutes of this,
the doctor asked to speak to Lynne's mother out in the hallway alone.

“As they were leaving the office, the doctor flipped on the radio,
and when they were shut [out] in the hallway,
the doctor pointed through the window back into the office.”

“Look,” he said, and directed the mother's attention to Gillian,
who had gotten up and started moving to the music as soon as they left.”

“Mrs. Lynne,” the doctor said,
“your daughter's not sick, she's a dancer.”

The doctor recommended enrolling Gillian in dance school.

When she got there she was delighted to discover a room full of
people like herself, “people who had to move to think,”
as Gillian explains it.

“Gillian went on to become a principal dancer in the Royal Ballet,
founded her own company and eventually began working with
Andrew Lloyd Webber and other producers [in London].

One of her biographers said of her:
“Here is a woman who has helped put together some of the most
successful musical productions in history,
has [brought joy] to millions, and is [now] a multi-millionaire.”
Of course if she were a child [today], he adds,
“someone would probably put her on drugs and tell her to calm down.”

Though it may have been more pronounced in Gillian
than it is for most of us, there is, I believe,
a fidgetiness in our bodies and in our souls
that is often the key to our becoming a happy and fulfilled human being.

That restlessness can be a catalyst to transformation.

The hard work of play can be the pathway
to uncovering our life's truest purpose.

So I invite you undertake a committed spiritual practice of play.

I challenge you to consider where you're feeling fidgety
and to decide just what you're going to do about it.

I can't say what that looks like for each of us.

Maybe it's deciding to play hockey again or to pick up an instrument.

Maybe it's letting your dog take you out for an extra long walk,
or deciding to ride the bumper cars at the CNE.

Maybe it's playing dress-up with your grandchildren,
your friends, or even by yourself.

Maybe it's allowing yourself to play make-believe,
and realizing a world that could yet be.

If, along the way, people point and laugh, and think that you're crazy,
feel free to tell them that your minister said this is some of the most important
spiritual work there is. . . !

(And, then you might ask them if they'd like to come out and play!)

Whether we need to find our inner pirate or our inner dancer,
or get in touch with the myriad other things our hearts tug at us to do,
let us give them over to what we love.

Let us do everything within our power
to hang on to that precious spirit of play that stirs within our hearts
that we might know wonder once again, and make the world new.

Amen.