

“Playing for Keeps”

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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.

Call to Worship

Come out and play!
Come out and take heart!

Come out with your
instruments,
insight and art

Come out from the inward
Come in from the out
Come carrying
wishes, and worry,
and doubt

Come out now and dance,
Come sing and come wonder
Come captivate
me, weave a spell
to fall under

Come as close as you can
Come as far as you must
Come into a circle
of presence and trust

That comes closer
To something that
no-one can name

Some thing that
Could overcome
Sorrow and shame.

Come out, come and go,
Come in, come and stay

Come light and
Come shadowed
and come what may

Come now,
as you are,
Come teacher,
Come friend.

Come out now
and play

Come again,
Yet again.

Sermon: “Playing for Keeps”

(Blowing bubbles)

I wonder if you can see the rainbows from where you are?

On each of the bubbles I’m blowing, I can see rainbows,
curving around the edges.

The American poet Carl Sandburg wrote a very short poem
about that.

“Two bubbles found they had rainbows on their curves.

They flickered out saying: "It was worth being a bubble,
just to have held that rainbow thirty seconds.”

This month we're talking about "play," and re-connecting with the free and childlike spirit we've felt at certain times of our lives.

I always loved blowing bubbles.

But it's a strange way to start a sermon that's called "playing for keeps," isn't it?

Because bubbles evaporate in a moment.
We can't hold onto them at all.

When children try to catch them, the joy is in the "not-catching" actually: the fact that even when they appear to be caught, they vanish.

In the spirit of play, we tend to laugh when this happens... not cry or complain.

How odd it would be, to get angry at the bubbles, or critical of ourselves when we couldn't catch them?

As human beings, we know on some level, that the bubbles won't last...and the spirit of play allows us to be okay with that.

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When we think of "play," we tend to think of something fleeting and joyful.

Something that comes and goes lightly.
Something we can shrug off, no matter what the outcome, with the words "it's only a game" or "it's not whether you win or lose."

Play is about process, more than outcome.

It's about taking yourself less seriously, having some fun, being willing to look silly, even to play badly.

Playing requires "beginner's mind"--an openness to the genuinely new and unfamiliar.

The young musicians with us today from the Regent Park School of Music can teach us something about "play"...

As can Rob Croxford, the artist whose nostalgic and whimsical creations enliven Sunderland Hall this month.

Whether we're musicians or artists or simply people practicing the "art of living", there are times when "play" feels effortless and we know that what we create is full of meaning.

There are other times when the "play" does not turn out as might have hoped...when some dissonant notes are sounded.

Yet, even then, if we widen the frame to allow ourselves to be beginners, like children at play, we can see that it is all part of a larger, inherently worthy completeness.

The great jazz musician Miles Davis said, "Do not fear mistakes. There are none."

No doubt he made choices in his life and art, in order to achieve certain outcomes.

And yet, this accepting and playful attitude clearly served him well. It allowed him a freedom and joy in his playing that otherwise would not have been possible.

Without the acceptance of imperfection, the ability to embrace mistakes rather than fear them, Miles Davis could never have recorded "Kind of Blue," a recording he made in 1959 which has endured for decades.

He "played for keeps." That is to say, he allowed himself to be truly playful and in the moment, whatever happened.

And in doing so, he created a work of art with lasting meaning.

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What I'm pointing to here is a paradox: two "truths" that would appear to cancel each other out, but that co-exist.

"Playing" freely, with no attachment to the outcome...
"for keeps," so that something may last.

Two very unlike concepts, hanging out together in such an ordinary, casual phrase.

Whenever paradox appears, you can be sure you're into the realm of religious thinking.

Paradox invites us into a consciousness that is counter-cultural.

In our secular Western world, we often think in terms of "right" and "wrong"... "yes" and "no"... "tolerable" and "intolerable"... "permanent" and "impermanent."

We all make these kinds of judgments.

Religion in its deepest sense invites us to bring those opposites into one.

Here in Unitarian communities, we know something about the overlapping of different perspectives.

In fact, we've built a whole movement on it: on the idea that despite the differences that may appear to separate us, we are all connected to a source of ultimate meaning.

We see our differences and we grapple with them, because we are human and we've decided to come together in this way...

And we stay here, it seems to me, because we have a sense that simply being in community connects us to that which transcends difference.

Sometimes we are held here by choice...but other times I'd venture to say we are held here by grace.

We wander off and drift, and we're brought back.

We're held, in this mutual presence, for a time...like those bubbles I played with earlier...like notes of music that linger in the air.

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One of my favourite children's books is called 'The Runaway Bunny, by Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd.

In it, a baby bunny declares to his mother that he is going to run away.

He says he's going to run to a hiding spot in the garden, to the top of a mountain, even to a circus, where he will fly away on a flying trapeze.

But his mother says, "If you go flying on a flying trapeze, I will be a tightrope walker, and I will walk across the air to you."

It's a game. A wonderful example of play and impermanence.

The baby bunny comes and he goes, and no landing-place is particularly better or worse than the next.

Each time he declares his intention, his mother says:
"No matter how often you run away or how far you go, I will find you.
Because you are my little bunny."

It's a story about "playing for keeps."

It reassures us that no matter what who we are, where we go, what mistakes we make...we are held by Life.

By Being, God or Presence...by the great Mother Earth.

Although people come and go, breaths come and go,
loves come and go, possessions come and go...

Life Itself is constant.

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In the time that I've been at First, the theme of impermanence has come up quite a bit in my sermons.

I wrote about dandelions...I preached when the lights went out...and there was that spectacular moment when Shawn's and my notes suddenly disappeared.

Meanwhile, the theme of permanence also has been in the air here, through the Building for the Future Task Force and through conversations about how we can make Unitarianism a lasting force in a changing world.

As an intern, one is always aware of the impermanence of the situation.

Meanwhile, as we're being evaluated toward a potential long-term commitment as a minister, we're at times tempted to not "play" at all.

We're encouraged to work very hard, to take everything very seriously, to multi-task and to strategize.

A key document that every candidate must complete before ordination is called the Statements of Competence. There are 17 such statements.

We're not encouraged to complete them in an improvisational or playful way, I'm afraid.

And yet, when I look at the people I admire in this field, I see that they are exceptional "play-ers."

They apply creative thinking to difficult problems... and they allow themselves the freedom to experiment and to fail.

They step out on limbs, and if they fall, they bounce back with good grace.

At the recent gathering of Canadian UU ministers in Montreal,

a group of nine ministers and candidates took trapeze lessons for an afternoon.

One of them was a 76 year-old woman, who entered the ministry in her forties and went on to serve congregations all over the world.

I'm pleased to say that I learned how to trapeze myself... as did Curtis Murphy, the new intern coming to First this fall.

Trapeze embodies many of paradoxes found in joyful play.

It takes holding on...and also letting go.

It takes strength to grip the bar... and surrender to the forces of gravity.

It requires commitment and stick-to-it-iveness... and it's over in an instant.

Kind of like life.

And it feels both serious and funny at the same time.

To paraphrase Carl Sandburg's short poem about bubbles:

It was worth being twenty-five feet off the ground and scared out of my wits, to fly through the air for fifteen seconds.

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Although Shawn couldn't be at the Trapezium that afternoon, he was right up there with us on the platform of play.

You see, Shawn is able to play creatively with the concept of UU community in a way that is inspirational.

Many times over the course of this year, I sat with him as we talked freely about what might be next for this church...for this faith... for this city.

Our conversations had an improvisational quality...

and gave me hope that new shapes of Unitarian life may emerge now...
to serve the world in a new way.

Dreaming is playful, whether it's at night or during the day.

And people who know how to play often know how to dream...
and how to put those dreams into action.

We need those dreams now...and the playful spirit to try them out. We need
play because the world's problems
are so very serious.

Stephen Nachmanovitch is a jazz violinist and Zen Buddhist.
In his wonderful book "Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art,"
he writes:

"The game we are now playing is for keeps.

This is an age that may see us either go down the drain
or create a whole new civilization.

Art is now more relevant than it has ever been.

And...I mean not just art but artfulness: playfulness,
seriousness, connectedness, structure, wholeness. And heart."

I agree that we need art and play now.
I agree that we need heart...and joy.

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So let me leave you with one last story, about the importance
of joy.

Last week, I was walking across the bridge over the Don River around ten
o'clock at night, thinking about today's sermon and wondering what I would
say.

(Which I guess is a tip-off that I'm becoming a minister.)

I saw a light zig-zagging along the sidewalk, racing towards me

at foot level.

I realized it was a remote control car being operated by a young man, apparently in his twenties, of a different ethnic background than mine.

As we passed each other our eyes met.

I said, “That’s awesome!” and he smiled.

In that moment, our shared joy formed a bridge across our differences and indeed turned our temporary time together into something meaningful and lasting.

The moment our eyes met and we shared that temporary yet eternal joy: that is the essence of religion for me.

That is the spark of God or goodness that I believe just might be powerful enough to change this world.

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When Carl Sandburg wrote his short poem about bubbles, I think he was talking about life.

But he might as well have been talking about my internship at First.

An internship is one of those funny things that has a solid shape and seems built to last, until it’s gone in the blink of an eye.

I’d like to take a moment to tell you what a joy it has been, to hold...and to *behold*...

The beautiful rainbow that is this congregation.

Our relationship is destined to linger a little while longer,

as we float together through the summer weeks ahead.

Knowing that our time together is temporary,
may we savour with delight these playful moments
that we share.

Thank you! And amen.