

“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.

They are, to me, some of the most depressing,
if not dangerous, words ever written.

And if you’ve ever been to (or in!) a Christian wedding,
you’ve very likely heard them.

The words come from the first letter of Saint Paul
to the Christian community at Corinth.

You may recall that he goes on at some length about love.

He famously says it’s patient and kind.
That it’s not boastful or rude.
That it doesn’t insist on having its own way,
but bears all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

It’s a pretty lofty definition and one worth wrestling with.
But that’s not the part I find particularly troubling.

That comes later—two verses later, to be exact, where he writes:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

In the King James version, that last bit reads:
“I put away childish things.”

Now, of course, no one, not even children, really strives to be childish!
There is much to be said, after all, for maturity.

And there’s nothing wrong with growing up.
Frankly, the thought crosses my mind (and maybe yours!),

every once in a while, that it would be nice if more people would try it.

But what I bristle against is the suggestion that the things of childhood are to be set completely aside when we reach a certain age.

We humans, like most animals, are made for play.
But, too often we forget.

We put away our play, as though it belongs merely to our youth, without always appreciating that play is a useful, critical part of living an engaged and meaningful life—that play can be a powerful way to get at experimental, creative problem-solving.

This month's Spiritual Exercise in our Theme Groups asks us to compile two lists: one that recalls the many activities we reveled in when we played as children, and the other, a list of activities that we, as adults, now regard as play.

If you haven't done the exercise already, it can be instructive to see how our childhood sense of play stacks up against the reality of our lives today, if it stacks up at all.

It's interesting to see if there are parallels or sharp breaks. If there's a dramatic drop-off that corresponds to a major life event—be it the end of our formal education, the birth of children, the beginning of a career, the death of a loved one, a bout of depression, or a time of struggle. For most of us, I'm guessing, how we play today, if we do at all, is quite different from how we played when we were children.

On one level, in doing the exercise myself, I was struck by how there is actually some awkward consistency in my life.

After all, one of my favourite things to play as a child was...church! I'd often play as a preacher, or a televangelist, or a faith healer.

My brothers and I would stand on one of our beds, place our healing hands on the head of the person with the illness, and, then, with one swift gesture, knock out the person who had been healed, as though they'd just been, as the saying goes, "slain in the spirit."

...sometimes children imitate what they see in real life!
Coming from a long line of ministers and missionaries,
we went to church a lot when I was growing up.
And we watched a fair bit of church, in all its wacky forms, on TV.

A habit that, to Bob's horror, I still can't quite kick.

On one level, I take heart in knowing that some forty years later
I've found a way to continue the play I knew as a child—
minus, of course, the bad theology, the faith healing,
and all the related antics.

What I've done less well, though,
is to hold on to the more unbounded, creative spirit of play.
Play simply for play's sake.

A few weeks ago, Lynn and I were with forty other ministers from across
the country at a retreat centre outside Montreal. A convent, actually!

Outside the large picture windows of the room where we met,
we had the pleasure of watching a group of young kids play one afternoon.

What was most striking about their play was that it didn't involve structure,
or guidance, or the props or equipment you might find on a playground.

Instead, all they had to work with was a fairly steep hill covered with grass.

And for a good half-hour, the kids ran up that hill
and then rolled down it on their sides.

Again and again, they climbed up
and then hurled themselves back to the bottom.
Most would get up laughing, and then go right back for more.

I tried to take in the whole scene as a visual meditation—
to take in, by proxy, the complete abandon and joy of their play.

I chastised myself each time my mind wandered
to thoughts of grass stains and what kind of detergent
would be required to thoroughly clean their clothes.

Or when I thought about broken limbs and liability insurance and ambulance response times.

The worries of adulthood can so easily crowd in on a scene like that.

I thought about how long it's been since I've spun myself down such a hill. And of the many, many things that cause me to pull caution *from* the wind and wherever else I can find it, to keep myself from doing it again.

In my meditation, I was bummed out by what an incredible buzz-kill the grown-up brain can be.

As you may know, I'm the facilitator of the theme group that is made up of all of the other theme group facilitators in the congregation.

We meet early in the month to go through the same material that theme group members explore in their own meetings a couple of weeks later.

I enjoy these sessions immensely. It's a wonderfully reflective time to hear the thoughts and experiences of others, and it's a precious time when I am able to practice deep listening, and in doing so, begin to hear my own soul speak.

It's an added blessing, each month, that I get to hear first-hand how others are wrestling with the month's theme and the questions that it raises.

What became clear in our session a couple of weeks ago is that most of us have put our child's play behind us.

Some of us really struggled to recall when we had last played. Some remembered, but reported that it had been a decade or more.

Many of us realized that our play, as adults, has taken on very different forms, and is often much more subtle than anything that we did for fun as children.

That's not necessarily a bad thing.

My hope, though, is that we might become more intentional about play—and see it as a means to contend with the challenges of our lives

in more creative and life-giving ways.

That, to me, is what's so wonderful about the Raging Grannies.
They're determined, as Kate says,
to dance their way through the revolution!

And, that's what I find so wonderful in the story of Antanas Mockus,
the man who served two very unconventional terms
as the mayor of Bogota, Columbia.

Almost twenty years ago, he left behind the world of academia,
where he worked as a professor of mathematics and philosophy,
to become the elected leader of a city that most of us knew at the time
as a haven for drug lords, and street gangs, and horribly violent crime.

Needless to say, he had his hands full.

Which makes all the more astounding his commitment to play—
to inject his work as mayor with a heavy dose of fun.

Shortly after stepping into the role, he showed up for events
where people were complaining about the state of the city
wearing a Superman costume and bearing the name "Super Citizen."

He recruited 420 mimes to work at pedestrian and traffic crossings
throughout the city.

If people ran across the street, without following the signals,
the mime would follow after, imitating and gently mocking them
to make the point.

They would single out reckless drivers and poke fun at them, too,
drawing attention in a playful way to the risks of their behaviour.

When the city was facing a severe water shortage,
Mockus appeared on television in his own shower,
live and all lathered up, to make the point
that they could save water by turning off the tap while scrubbing.

Within a month, water usage had fallen 14% across the city.
After people saw the economic savings from reduced consumption,

overall water usage fell by 40%.

At another point, his office distributed 350,000 cards with either a thumbs-up or thumbs-down image.

People were encouraged to use them to praise positive behaviour they spotted in their neighbourhoods—or to admonish those from whom they expected more.

When Mockus came to office, women were afraid to be on the streets of the city at night.

So he instituted Women's Night Out by imposing a voluntary curfew on men, asking them to stay in and watch the kids, and reflect on the role of women in their society.

The women, for their part, enjoyed free outdoor concerts, drink specials at bars, and the joy of travelling around in groups on these nights to look in on houses across the city and applaud whenever they found men handling the domestic duties that so often fell to them.

Mockus is the first to point out that he didn't solve all the city's problems. But during his time in office, crime dramatically dropped and social cohesion radically rose.

He used humour and playfulness to begin unraveling the knotted mess his city had become.

He built trust and invited engagement. So much so that when he asked the citizens of Bogota to voluntarily pay an extra 10% in taxes, 63,000 people actually stepped up to the plate.

Imagine.

I won't be making an endorsement during our eternal mayoral race, but someone who could lead our city with a creative and playful spirit would go a long way, I think, to overcoming behaviour at City Hall that has been childish and worse over these past three and a half disheartening years.

We need someone to call us to be more than merely tax-payers.
We need someone who calls us to be citizens,
committed to the well-being of all who call this city home.

In short, we need someone who sees, in the words of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber that, “Play is the exultation of the possible.”

That play is the exultation—the celebration—of the possible.

But, of course, this isn’t only a needed qualification for mayor.

It should be a qualification for our premier and our MPPs,
for all our elected leaders, from the TDSB to the House of Commons.

We need teachers, and bank clerks, and TTC drivers,
who see in their work the quality of play
that unleashes the spirit of creativity.

We need waiters, and activists, and software engineers
who embrace play as a meaningful path toward innovation.

We need retirees, and rental car agents, and government employees
who recognize play as powerful means to fulfilling our human potential.

Simply put, we need as many people as possible, in their everyday lives,
to nurture the sacred hope that we can solve the problems we face
with the ingenuity and imagination that are so often the output of play.

Play need not belong to childhood alone.
We can come to see play as all of life—and all of life as play.
In Hinduism, all of life, all of creation, is known as Lila,
the play of the gods.

As a result, Hindus tend to laugh off the question
of whether the universe, the cosmos, or existence itself is serious.

It’s not to be taken seriously at all.
It’s all Lila. It’s all play.
It’s all endlessly unfolding and no one can know where it’s going,
not even the gods.

The point is to play the game and not take ourselves too seriously.

I'm intrigued by how this worldview aligns in some ways with what's called Process Theology, the school of thought embraced by many Unitarian Universalists over the past several decades.

Process theology sees the ongoing emergence of the universe as a creative act to which we, in each present moment, are partners.

The game of life is being played out in each passing instance—
with every moment an occasion of becoming,
each tick of the clock an opportunity for us, as co-creators of what is,
as co-authors of history, to exult in what is possible.

My colleague, Victoria Safford, the writer of so many wonderful meditations is the source of this one, with which I'll close.

What if there were a universe, a cosmos,
that began in shining blackness, out of nothing, out of fire,
out of a single, silent breath,
and into it came billions and billions of stars,
stars beyond imagining, and near one of them a world,
a blue-green world so beautiful that learned clergymen
could not even speak about it cogently, and brilliant scientists
in trying to describe it began to sound like poets,
with their physics, with their mathematics,
their empirical, impressionistic musing?

What if there were a universe
in which a world was born out of a smallish star,
and into that world (at some point) flew red-winged blackbirds,
and into it swam sperm whales, and into it came crocuses,
and wind to lift the tiniest hairs on naked arms in spring
when you run out to the mailbox,
and into it at some point came onions, out of soil,
and came Mount Everest, and also the coyote we've been seeing...
just after sunrise in these mornings when the moon is full?

.... Into that world came animals and elements and plants,
and imagination, the mind, and the mind's eye.

If such a universe existed and you noticed it, what would you do?

What song would come out of your mouth,
what prayer, what praises, what sacred offering,
what whirling dance, what religion, and what reverential gesture
would you make to greet that world,
every single day that you were in it?

Blessed to live in just such a world,
may we greet the dawn of this and every day we are given
with grace and gratitude and playful, creative spirits.

Amen.