

“Welcome to the Play Space”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon
on 12 June 2016

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.

It’s nearly the summer solstice, and you may be looking forward to going away. You know those vacations that are more like work? The ones that are overplanned and way too short for getting everything “accomplished” you want to, the ones where you can never seem to relax? No good. I’m sure we’ve all had a few of those!

Well, about five years ago I was down in Costa Rica on a yoga retreat on the west coast in a little town called Montezuma with two of my favourite teachers. To get there my close German friend Bernadette and I took two flights, a ferry, a bus, and a crazy unmarked taxi along winding dirt roads deep into the jungle. Talk about remote! We had a whole week completely unplugged for focusing on the theme of myths and mangoes. No choice but to relax.

During a boating excursion midweek, we went snorkeling and searching for dolphins in a deep bay that Jacques Cousteau apparently loved. First we saw dolphins from the boat, and then if we wanted to, we could jump in the water and swim with them. Of course I couldn’t resist! I’ll never forget the thrill and curiosity I felt as they swam around and under me and my friends and kept surfacing and resurfacing and playfully splashing around. I had never gotten that close to these fascinating wild sea creatures before. Being in their habitat, fully exposed to them, was exhilarating and so much fun.

I got so absorbed in swimming with the dolphins—and later in snorkeling around some tiny rock formations—that our guides had to call me back to the boat. I had lost all track of time and was completely enthralled and fully attentive to the fantastically beautiful underwater scenery before me. It’s like I became one with the magical brightly-coloured fish and coral. Their world became my own. I needed nothing else. But then the guys hailed me back to the boat so the group excursion could continue. Back to reality! I was

slightly embarrassed that I was the only one left in the water! I didn't want my experience to end.

Without realizing it, I had entered the form of meditation poet and naturalist Diane Ackerman claims is at the heart of deep play. As she describes it, "With one's senses heightened, one enters 'the zone,' 'the flow,' a 'cocoon of consciousness,' in which one feels a strong sense of detachment from the relationships and trappings of ordinary life."¹ After entering this meditative state, you usually feel a sense of calm and well-being. That's what I certainly felt during my adventures in the water that day.

Let's pause for a moment. Consider the last time you found yourself in this kind of meditative state of deep play. Was it recently, or do you have to think all the way back to the days of childhood?

Call to mind an image of play in your life that was joyful and freeing somehow from the stresses and worries of everyday life. What was the main feeling you had during that experience? How long were you immersed in it? Can you conjure that feeling again now?

Psychiatrist, play researcher, and recovering workaholic Stuart Brown, who heads up the National Institute for Play near Monterey, California (yes, there is such a place!), proposes that we might end up changing our lives after reflecting on these kinds of experiences. I'm not sure I'm that ambitious with my sermon this morning, but I do want you to give serious thought about how you relate to and think about play.

Children naturally enter into a state of play, so maybe all you need to do is recall when you were last around kids. As we just observed during the Time for All Ages and the story of the Flying Fish, kids so effortlessly teach us how to play. *They're* not afraid to be silly! They model this state because that's how they thrive and grow. *What do we adults lose when we stop playing?*

Stuart Brown argues that play is necessary for our survival and that without it we can become depressed and lose something of our potential for joy and creativity. He even claims that as a species "we're really designed to play through our whole lifetime." Play isn't just reserved for childhood. Although we may rarely reflect on it, each of us has what Brown calls a "play history" unique to us. It matters how much we play.

¹ Diane Ackerman, *Deep Play* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2000) 194.

Brown has worked with neuroscientists to study how play affects the brains of animals and humans. It's fascinating research, and I highly recommend his TED talk. According to Brown, play teaches us trust, empathy, and problem solving and enhances our lives in so many ways. As Brown argues, life should become infused by all sorts of play. Once it does, you'll have a "better and more empowered" life as a result. In fact, he says, "Nothing lights up the brain like play."²

What are some of the main characteristics of play?

- It's joyful
- It's purposeless
- It's usually practical and very hands-on (literally uses your hands)
- It's born of curiosity and exploration
- It's wholly absorbing
- It happens beyond everyday life
- There's a focus on the present moment
- It's embodied (engages head and heart)
- It calms and relaxes us
- We can see it as a form of self-care and means of rejuvenation
- Involves an element of ecstasy or rapture
- Always includes some sense of freedom or choice
- "Deep play" in Diane Ackerman's sense of the word, leads to transcendence, creativity, and a need for the sacred.

A few summers ago I taught yoga on Star Island, a UU retreat centre off the coast of New Hampshire, for a week in August. While there, I participated in an improvisational music workshop with Tim Love Lee, a well-known British DJ and record producer. There were about 10 of us in the class, and we quickly bonded. About half of the participants were musicians of some sort. We started the week by "performing" together John Cage's famous piece 4'33', which is essentially just silence, and then Tim taught us all sorts of ways to playfully make music. We stomped and we clapped and we played with improvised call and response. We created instruments from found objects in the room we were in—chairs, lamps, tables, coffee cans, bowls, floorboards, you name it. Tim's basic premise was that we're ALL musicians, even those of us with no training or aptitude for playing music.

² Stuart Brown, "Play Is More Than Just Fun," TEDTalk (2009): https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital/transcript?language=en.

Initially I was skeptical and had a lot of resistance to this notion because that's not what I learned growing up. I played an instrument in school, but always felt judged by my music teachers and branded as NOT a musician. That all or nothing approach sapped all the fun out of my playing, and I eventually gave up the flute and all attempts to play other instruments. I let myself be totally defeated. Either I was going to be a professional, or I should just give up.

But Tim's highly playful workshop years later changed my attitude and helped me to heal some of those old wounds. I looked forward to every single meeting. I can't remember laughing so much with a group of other adults as we allowed ourselves to listen, feel, and create sounds or soundscapes together freely. It was all about play and letting go of old rules and assumptions about how music should sound or be performed. Of course it helped that our guide Tim was goofy and uninhibited in his goofiness.

A couple of years later, while in seminary, I took a risk by attending workshops on leading paperless singing and eventually became a pretty good song leader at St. Lydia's, the dinner church I belong to in Brooklyn. The low-stakes playing with Tim and the others that summer convinced me that maybe I did have rhythm and a decent voice after all. I found joy again in music making.

The title of my sermon, "Welcome to the Play Space," was inspired by the work of British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. He was one of my favourite theorists in some of my Psychiatry & Religion classes at Union Theological Seminary. One of his main ideas is his concept of play, which he developed in his work with children in London during and right after the war. Winnicott perceives play as central to emotional and psychological well-being. Playing is key to developing genuine selfhood, or what he called one's "true self." Children learn to play in their earliest years in the "potential space" between themselves and their mothers that they can hopefully trust and feel safe in. Without this, the child may feel the need to hide her true self and to become instead whatever others want or need her to be. This resulting "false self" lacks a sense of realness and spontaneity.

Winnicott links play to creativity and cultural production. For him, culture—music, art, theatre—becomes a kind of transitional space or play space for adults. Religion can also have a similar function. Winnicott's notion of play is characterized as spontaneous, intense, and alive. In my view, the healthy, high-functioning adult who can open herself to this kind of play that

makes her feel most real and most alive will also potentially have a dynamic and full religious or spiritual life. There's at least a good possibility of that.

Here's what theologian Howard Thurman says about religion and humour: “[When] the merry music of the humorous spirit [prevails], [i]t means that fear is in rout, that there is deep understanding of the process of life and an expansive faith which advises the spirit *that... life can be trusted*. What a deadly religion if it has no humor—what a dreary life where that precious venture has not emerged.”³ Just as life without plays lacks creativity and spontaneity, the same applies to religion.

What role, if any does play have in your spiritual life? What would worship—and congregational life more generally—feel like if it had more play in it? Are we as Unitarians sometimes guilty of being a little too earnest or uptight? I know I've been. I have many concerns for this broken world of ours, and there's so much hard work to do to heal it and ourselves that play can seem superficial and unproductive.

Is Diane Ackerman right when she talks about religion's being inevitable in connection with play? Why might this be hard for us to imagine sometimes? Do we somehow deny our own humanity when we give play short shrift? As one of my beloved ministers used to always say, these are some questions to ponder this week while doing the dishes...

I'd like to close by providing a short reflection on what I would call a theology of play or imperfection. I think this would potentially be welcoming of all, and we can already see its roots in our Universalist heritage with its explicit theological notions of forgiveness, of God as eternal and all-conquering love, and of the inherent worth of every person. In his book, *Open-Hearted Ministry*, Michael S. Koppel lists some of the qualities of play as embodied theology:

- Allowing not-knowing to be a guide rather than a hindrance
- Play helps contain anxiety and guilt
- Play develops from taking small steps (small steps can be gratifying: we might be engaged more in the moment)
- Play helps reign in the tendency to try to “fix” situations

³ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981) 74-75 (emphasis added).

A theology of play would be inherently relational and would strengthen our bonds of mutuality and community. As I envision it, it would foster creativity and innovation. It would rejuvenate our spirits and remind us of our deepest needs and desires. It would be based in forgiveness and would avoid the rigidity, negativity, and judgmentalism (of self and others) that are some of the common pitfalls of perfectionism. Most importantly, it would be steeped in feelings of joy and celebration. It might even go so far as to acknowledge the Holy playing within us—an “inner playground”⁴ where everything seems possible, a space we tend and nurture lovingly through play.

That’s what I want to leave you with today—a sense that church can be a rare and special place in our lives for deep play and the risk-taking and creativity that accompany it. We bring our whole selves to play. It’s very embodied and uses our right brain more. Imagine church as a play space containing more joy, more peace, more possibility. A place where we feel safe enough to try out new things, to make mistakes, and to grow together in community. We’ll be changed by our experiences in this play space, our spiritual lives forever deepened. Welcome!!

May we be guided by the spirit of play and may it open us to new growth and discovery in ourselves and in the wider community today and every day.

Blessed be and amen.

⁴ Michael S. Koppel, *Open-Hearted Ministry: Play as Key to Pastoral Leadership* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008) 115.