



## The Magic of Play

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Ralph Waldo Emerson once observed that “It is a happy talent to know how to play.” But I have found it a difficult talent to utilise over the past couple of years. The last time I can remember being immersed in play was doing the chicken dance at Rachel’s and my wedding. It was also the first day someone entered the country infected with Covid and life changed dramatically for me in two ways. Getting married does that for everyone. The other change encompassing us all occurred six weeks later when we went into lockdown busy hoarding toilet paper.

Three lockdowns later our capacity to play has been severely hampered. Matthew Fox reminded us that “[t]here is a mystic in every one of us, yearning to play again in the universe.” I know that yearning. I need more than bingeing on Netflix or taking out the recycling to feel alive.

While I enjoy both cats and dogs, Waldo reminds me daily to be less aloof and allow myself to experience and engage in more fun and joy.

Last weekend Waldo had a house guest, a terrier named Arvo. At first Waldo was miffed that Arvo had been invited into his territory without his permission. But soon he got over it. He could not resist engaging in full time play. Tug-of-war seemed to be a favourite:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/9i20lia5zedy8ms/Waldo.MOV?dl=0>

They reminded me of a piece of wisdom by Kurt Vonnegut, “I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around and don’t let anybody tell you different.” I was taking life way too seriously. I’d forgotten how to fart around, was left wondering why I am here.

Anthony Makar In a *UU World* article tells a favourite story of psychologist Dr Peter Gray about being invited to play Scrabble with two young girls. Gray saw this as an opportunity to teach them. The girls loved the basic setup of the game, but had no interest in the actual rules and instead made up their own.

Their unstated but obvious goal, on each turn, was to put down the longest, funniest nonsense word that they could, using as many letters as possible from their rack combined with at least one letter on the board. It had to sound like it *could* be a word, but it could not be an actual word. The object was not to score points but to make each other laugh, and laugh they did! They laughed like only two high-spirited ten-year-old girls who have long been best friends can laugh. Sometimes one would “challenge” the other’s “word,” asking for a definition, and the other would offer an hysterical definition that somehow seemed to fit with the way the “word” sounded; and then they would laugh even harder.

As Gray began to laugh along with them, he realised his way of playing was something like what we usually call *work*. Their way of playing was *play*. He began to reflect on what is the vital difference between play and play. He reached the conclusion that he, too, used to play like that, as a child.

What makes play *play*? In researching it, Gray identified five factors that make play play. Play is activity freely entered, is self-determining, is full of imagination, is valued primarily because it is enjoyable, and is characterised by a mindset of utter absorption.

What’s amazing is how evolution — which is as practical and ruthless as you can get — seems to love playfulness.

It’s because play develops our mind and keeps it sharp.

It’s because play can provide safe outlets for releasing aggressive impulses.

It’s because risky play teaches kids how to regulate fear and anger.

We play because play teaches us how to take turns, which is nothing less than the basis of civilization.

We play because it gives us the opportunity to connect and socialise.

We play because it enlivens our imaginations, opening doors to new insights and connections.

It turns out not playing is contrary to our nature. What has happened?

I certainly know what happened since I chicken danced over two years ago. There has been a lot to be serious about and there still is. There always is. But when things are serious, that may be when we most need our playfulness. And when things are serious, that's also what playfulness has been preparing us for since we were little kids. There's a reason why playfulness is explicitly part of so many of the world's religions.

Play helps us get out of our heads. When we become absorbed in it, we let go of the self-awareness that is so often accompanied by an inner critic. It's very liberating. We transcend ourselves for a while.

Religion offers transcendence. We see it in the many creative rituals, music, liturgical dance, funny parables, and jokes. Jokes are disarming. They come in sideways at truths. The comedian Lenny Bruce is reported to have said, "I know my humour is outrageous when it makes the Unitarians so mad they burn a question mark on my front lawn."

We hold the truth lightly but that doesn't mean we don't stand for anything. That's what this joke gets at, but sideways.

Alan Watts, who was a lifelong Buddhist and (for a short time) an Episcopal priest, said the universe seems to be essentially playful itself, in the sense that it is totally unnecessary. It is not for a particular end.

That's an interesting idea. Watts pointed out that Hinduism describes the creation of the universe as Lila, or divine play. I think the Jewish and Christian stories of creation also seem like divine play. In them God is improvising, imagining things into being, and enjoying them (seeing that they are "good"). God creatively populates the earth with such creatures as the tasselled wobbegongs, a shark that sits motionless on the seafloor pretending to be a carpet, waiting for unsuspecting prey to swim a bit too close; the red-lipped batfish, a bizarre creature endemic to Galapagos, that walks instead of swimming and looks as though it is ready for a night on the town; and my favourite recently discovered in the Peruvian Amazon, that looks like a Harry Potter film cast member, the chocolate frog.

There is some good news about our loss of playfulness. The Rev Angela Herrera notes that humans are one of the few animals that do not lose their capacity to

play, even if they no longer do. This trait is called *neoteny*, It means retaining immature qualities into adulthood. And here you thought being immature was a bad thing. It turns out our playfulness, which humans are hardwired to retain all their lives, is one of our superpowers. It has helped us to be adaptive, resilient, and creative.

Plagued by pandemics, an inflated cost of living, climate change and the threat of nuclear war, we especially need those strengths right now, don't we? As we face what seems insurmountable, our playfulness and our joy are not a diversion, but a strength. They are also irresistible. Who would you rather join forces with in the work for a better world? Playful people, I mean Unitarians, right? The people who've tapped into creativity and joy.

We retain our playful hardwiring throughout our lives, but as we get older, people do tend to play less. In our work-oriented culture, play may be perceived as a waste of time.

Also, our egos or negative self-talk might get in the way. Are there some ways you'd like to play, but you're holding yourself back? Maybe you think, "That's too silly," or "I'd look silly." It might help to know that the word silly comes from the old German word *selig*, which means blessed.

Earlier I quoted Alan Watts arguing that "The universe seems to be essentially playful itself, in the sense that it is unnecessary. It is not for a particular end." On one level I agree about it not being necessary, but on another I take issue.

In order for there to be beauty and awe, the universe was necessary.

It was necessary, in order for love to take place.

It was necessary, that existence could mean something.

It was necessary, that the bond between energies and particles, the interconnectedness of all things, could be given extraordinary shapes.

In that sense, the universe is as necessary as our apparently purposeless playing.

It is necessary so we have a place to fart around.

The Rev Marisol Caballero has written words that inspire me to draw upon my superpower and play, *“To play is to pretend... and honestly, sometimes the world seems too heavy to leave the house, let alone inspire moments of joy. But the more I watch the news these days, the more I'm coming to view playing — intentionally seeking joy — as a means of radical resistance.”*

Come, put on your Spiderman PJs, bring your Wonder Woman lariat and join me in the Batmobile to save the world from its too serious self.

**Meditation / Conversation Starter:**

How do you play as an adult?

How does it make you feel?