



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“All Work and No Play Is No Way to Live Well”

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Centering Thoughts

Life must be lived as play. Plato

We don't stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing.
George Bernard Shaw

Life is playfulness...we need to play so that we can rediscover the magical around us. Flora Colao

Fun isn't the hard thing. The hard thing is letting yourself have it. Bernard De Koven

Sermon

Tomorrow is Labor Day.

Labor, a word originally associated with the type of hard, physical work performed by both coal miners and birthing mothers, now more broadly includes all workers. By federal mandate many workers receive a break from their labors tomorrow. Workers get a day to parade, picnic, and otherwise play. Workers get one last hurrah to play as everybody says goodbye to summer, that traditional time for vacations and outdoor leisure activities.

If you haven't already planned a play date for tomorrow's federal holiday, if you can I hope you will. Even those of you who have officially stopped working or are laboring students, I hope you'll find time for some play. If you can't, at least you've played a bit here today. /

I'm sure you're familiar with the old saying, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” The old adage stands the test of time for Jack and everybody else. Although we all need work, activities that give purpose and meaning to our lives – we also need play. Some of us are lucky enough to have work that is play.

The late Gene Wilder was one such person. I was sad to hear of his death this past week because watching him and his movies always made me laugh. My two sons, husband, and I regularly have fun recalling our favorite lines from “Blazing Saddles” and “Young Frankenstein,”

or more accurately, “Young *Frahnkensteen*”. In preparation for this sermon I watched some film bloopers from “Young Frankenstein” on YouTube. Wilder and the rest of the cast and crew clearly had fun – the play – while earning a living – the work.

In an interview this past week with Jimmy Fallon, Director Mel Brooks shared that Gene Wilder dreamed up the storyline about the grandson of Dr. Frankenstein resisting the family business of bringing life to the dead. This unusual inner conflict inspired Wilder and Brooks to turn horror into humor. Genius emerged from their playfulness.

Psychologists confirm that playful imaginations contribute to innovation and creativity in the workplace. Even if you’re job isn’t to make funny movies, work and general problem-solving can be improved when it includes a little play. We have absent-minded professors and day-dreaming entrepreneurs to thank for great inventions, new technologies, and inspired ideas. Whatever we do – as a worker, student, or volunteer – the work improves when balanced with play.

Another movie director, Alfred Hitchcock, used to stop production of a movie when something felt stuck. He’d tell a story that had nothing to do with the movie they were making. It was his way of breaking into the team’s work-mode, and distracting them with something playful so they could come back to the production with fresh ideas.

Unfortunately, not all of us have fun in our work. For many, finding work or doing the work is drudgery. When that is the case, the need for play, fun, and joy outside of work becomes imperative. Numerous medical studies have shown the vital connection between physical health and emotional health. We know joy, fun, happiness, love, and similar emotions reduce stress hormones, build resiliency, and ease burdens. Play offers us new ways of looking at situations, enlivens us, renews optimism, reduces violence and depression, and fosters belonging and cooperation. [Stuart L. Brown, *How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*] True play brings great joy, fun, happiness and even healthier, loving relationships. Indeed, ‘the body heals with play, the mind heals with laughter, and the spirit heals with joy’.

Psychiatrist Lenore Terr, author of *Beyond Love and Work*, defines play as “activity directed primarily at having fun.” She defines work as “activity directed primarily at personal and family sustenance, the achievement of power, [and] the making of societal contribution.” She adds that work can carry the goal of having fun, but if play becomes mostly work, that’s not play.

Adults often play by participating in a sport. But just because you play tennis or golf, for example, it doesn’t always mean you’re playing or having fun. Some people allow their competitive spirit to overwhelm their sense of play, turning sport into work. When winning becomes the goal, fun is lost. Olympian Michael Phelps quit swimming a few years ago when he claimed it was no longer fun. He returned to Rio because he found the fun again. He wanted to end his career on a happy note, whether he won more gold or not.

At the risk of killing all sense of playfulness, psychologist David Elkind, in his book *The Power of Play*, identifies nine characteristics or indicators of play. Before I name these, try to remember a playful experience you’ve had. Maybe it was when you played with dolls or a game of

tag or chess. Maybe it was when gardening, reading a book, or painting. Then, as I say them, test these elements against that joyful experience of play.

Per Elkind, it's play if the activity includes:

1. No worry of failure—whether you win or lose doesn't matter
2. Clear goals every step of the way—you know what you're supposed to do
3. Immediate feedback on your actions—you move ahead, you skip a turn; you rightly guess whodunit, etc
4. Balance between challenge and skill—some risk heightens the experience, but not so much that known talents can't be relied upon
5. Action and awareness merged—you're so involved, you're on autopilot
6. Sense of time becomes distorted—you're not aware of time passing
7. Distractions excluded from consciousness—you're so engrossed, you don't know what's happening around you
8. Self-consciousness disappears—you don't worry about how you look, or if you're good enough, etc
9. The activity is an end in and of itself—the doing is what matters, not what you get for it, like a gold medal or bragging rights

In short, play is when you're fully one with the activity. The fun is so engaging you're totally, completely absorbed by the play and you forget any problems that may exist outside of the play. You know you're playing when you're immersed in its flow.

If one or more of these nine elements of play occur in whatever it is you work at, then I imagine you enjoy your work more than someone without these.

Fortunately, I can say my life and work includes many of these elements of play. For me, preparing a worship service is play. I have fun considering which stories I'll tell, which hymns to sing, or what style of language best fits the message. Creative problem-solving, imagining new possibilities for worship, designing a building, and developing adult programming is playful for me.

Another way my ministry includes an element of playfulness is what I wear. In the colder months I enjoy wearing fun socks. Since often it's only the choir that can see my socks from where they sit, I'll show you a selection. Here's a pair with a pink pig face; another with cats playing with yarn; bold stripes; fire-breathing dragons; Christmas trees; and my newest pair sport little UU chalices. I bought them at General Assembly but you can get your own online from the UUA bookstore.

You may think I'm at my most serious work when leading worship on Sunday morning, but now you know my secret, I'm really playing.

What's more, when I'm wearing playful socks I'm engaging in a subtle act of rebellion. It's a way to thumb my nose, or feet, at a culture that equates playfulness with childishness or worse. We UUs come from a long line of Puritans who preached that play was sinful. It was those Puritans who outlawed Christmas festivities as an inappropriate way to celebrate Jesus' birth. And it was those Puritans who bequeathed us a work ethic that makes us feel guilty for goofing off.

But let's be counter-cultural! Let's briefly look at other religious traditions for playful inspiration. Taoists understand being in the flow, of being in harmony with life. The yin/yang symbol is a perfect example of balance. Harmony requires a balance of work and play.

In the Hindu pantheon, the god Krishna acts young at heart, forever playing games with humans, especially wiling away his time with attractive young women. Flirting, romancing, and sexuality can be quite playful. But manipulation, mean-spiritedness, or destructive, abusive behavior, sexual or otherwise, is not play. True play celebrates life and brings fun and joy to its participants.

In the Islamic Sufi tradition, the wise fool Nasrudin shows us the value of play. Nasrudin's foolishness teaches truth by coming at it indirectly, not unlike Hitchcock. And Jewish and Christian prophets speaking for God often employed shocking, unconventional acts to challenge their group's behavior.

We need these examples of play now more than ever. We need not to be so wrapped up in the problems of our world that we forget to play—for play will build the reserves we need to face those problems.

We need the lightness of being that play creates to better face the fact that our lives will end in death—and what could be more absurd?

We need the lightness of being that play affords when we do the serious work of relieving, in whatever way we can, the hundreds of thousands around the world who are dying from disease, malnutrition, abuse, neglect, and war.

We need the lightness of being that play offers when bringing groups in conflict together so that bonds can be forged and new hope for peace and healing encouraged.

We need the lightness of being that play brings young black men feeling hopeless, police officers feeling under attack, and undocumented immigrants fearfully hiding.

We need play to face the work of the world.

We need play to maintain our emotional, spiritual, and physical balance so that we can do the work that desperately needs doing.

Come, let us play, even as we work.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Name your favorite ways to play as a child and as an adult. How does playing make you feel?
2. Does past or present work, studies, or volunteerism feel like play to you? Do these bring you joy or happiness while doing any of these activities? If not, could they?
3. How well do you balance the amount of time you work, play, and perhaps do nothing? What might you need to maintain a better balance of these in your life?