

**Sermon: “Playing for Keeps”**  
**The Rev. Martha Hodges**                      **January 10, 2010**

I've never been especially good at play, or so I've always thought. During recess, I was the kid reading a book on the teeter totter or engaged in deep conversation with the teacher. I've never had what you could call a hobby – nothing that is generally recognized as one, at least. So I worry about this, and, true to form, jumped at the chance to read a book about it. As you may know about me by now, when in doubt about anything, I head to the library or to Amazon.com.

Well, guess what? It turns out that reading a book about play is a playful thing to do. Or it can be. According to Stuart Brown, the author of *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*<sup>1</sup>, and the founder and director of the National Institute for Play, play is less about any particular activity than it is a state of mind. And a sense of irony and an appreciation of the absurd can be key elements to that “state of play.” So if you thought that play was just what we did for fun, think again.

Brown has pioneered a serious field of research into the importance of play in the lives of adults as well as children, and the harmful effects that play deprivation can have on us. An absence of play in our lives can make us vulnerable to illness, rigid in our thinking, inflexible and unable to adapt to our rapidly changing environments. It can make us socially inept, unable to read the emotional signals of others and lacking in empathy. Abused children who grow up without the joy of play are more likely to become violent criminals. All work and no play makes Jack not just a dull boy, it turns out, but very likely a depressed and quite possibly a dangerous boy. Fun is just the beginning of the story.

Of course, one person's play is another person's drudgery, or worse. Not everyone here, I would guess, would think that writing and delivering a sermon would be fun. And don't try putting me on a softball field. So what do all the things that people consider “play” have in common? Well, according to Stuart Brown, play is something we do for its own sake; it is apparently purposeless. (I would qualify that, incidentally. Play can have a conscious purpose, like learning something useful or getting the garden to produce vegetables, but it is something we would do even if there were no concrete payoff.)

An activity must be voluntary in order to be play. There must be some inherent pleasure in it. It must allow us to lose track of time by drawing us into an altered state of mind in which we are purely focused on the immediate moment. It frees us from our consciousness of self. It has the potential for improvisation, and it is something that we want to continue and return to. Voluntary, inherently rewarding, and allowing us to shed our self-conscious awareness of time and obligation... Play, says Brown, is the essence of freedom.

Play energizes us and eases our burdens; it makes us more optimistic and open to possibilities; it lifts us out of the mundane. When shared with others, it creates bonds of friendship and understanding.

What kinds of activities provide you with this kind of freedom, this kind of joy in being alive? Watch a couple of dogs chasing each other or a sea otter diving and twisting through the water for the sheer joy of movement; watch a child playing with a doll or a toy

truck, and it's obvious what play is for them. It's not always so easy to recognize play in us adults, let alone remember how it feels or how to do it.

Creative play in adults includes painting, playing a musical instrument, writing a poem, making a pot or a sweater or a bookshelf, acting in a play or reading aloud to a child. Grown-up play, like child-play can involve trying our new scenarios and possible ways of being through fantasy and make-believe. Daydreaming is play. Games, competitive or not, games you can buy in a box or ones that are spontaneous and unscripted – word play, flirtation or friendly teasing, are play for grown-ups. Sex can certainly be play. Games of imagination, including reading a book or watching TV, can be play if they fully engage you, if they claim your participation in co-creating the world depicted. Play can be aesthetic pleasure, a walk along the river or a trip to a museum. It can be an adventure, a test of your skills and limits, as it is for runners and other athletes. It can be form of exploration – travel or invention or study. All of these can be grown-up play if entered into with a playful mind.

Activities that look like work may be play, of course, for those of us lucky enough to find work that allows us to be flexible, innovative, and creative. And an activity that looks like play isn't necessarily play.

Sometimes it's work. I wonder about professional athletes, for example. Is the NFL player having fun out there when his livelihood depends on the pass completed or the tackle made? For that matter, are amateur athletes always having fun? In order for a game of any kind to be real play, Brown says, the odds of winning have to be reasonably even. If one player or one team is clearly outmatched, in order for the contest to be play, the superior one must allow some kind of handicapping to take place. We see this in animals. If a big cat and a little cat are play-fighting, the larger one will lie on its back and fight from that position. Golfers give themselves handicaps all the time, of course. This may be less out of a sense of fairness, than from a desire to see the game prolonged. When this doesn't occur, when one contestant is grossly inferior in skill, it's no game at all.

And play can easily edge into something nasty. Aggression is often a part of play. Sometimes that underlying edge breaks through into something cruel. When asked if play has a "dark side" Brown says no. He insists that there is a definite line between play and the intention to hurt; that play by definition is benign and empathic. It may not be surprising that someone who is devoted to the science of play has such a sunny view of human nature. I'm not so sure. For some people, inflicting pain or humiliation on another is a game. And sadists and bullies aside, perfectly ordinary people can easily cross the line into bald aggression. You can see it on the playground all the time. The kids are play-fighting, and all of a sudden, it's not play anymore. You can see it between couples or friends when supposedly good-natured teasing takes on a different color and words are spoken that are meant to hurt, all under the guise of play.

When I was about ten, I was playing a game of make-believe with a friend, acting out some kind of drama that we'd made up. In the situation we'd created, my friend was supposed to be angry with me. Suddenly, to my horror and amazement, she spat in my face. All in the name of the story we were acting out. Supposedly. The game stopped, she apologized, and all was forgiven. Supposedly. In truth, I think she was as surprised by her action as I was. But having been the recipient of the aggression, let me tell you... You may forgive the spitting, but you don't forget it. To me it was clear, even at age ten,

that my friend was not playing when that happened. That was angry at me about something and was acting out her true feelings at that point, all in the name of play. So I think that, yes, play does have a dark side.

Risk is often a part of play, and sometimes the risk is real. Children fall out of trees and off of play structures. Race car drivers crash. Sopranos fail to hit that high note. But the intention is not to hurt yourself or anyone else. The motivation is to test your limits, and sometimes, those limits are surpassed; other times we run right into them like a brick wall. But the intent is playful, even if sometimes serious as well.

Individuals who play with other people like so many chess pieces, on the other hand, may be enjoying that game immensely, but the girlfriend or husband or child who is being manipulated or exploited is not playing. One of the qualities of real play is that it is voluntary and consensual, and this kind of narcissistic play is one-sided; it isn't real play.

And games that look like play but are compulsive are joyless and destructive. The poker player who is betting that month's mortgage payment is hardly in a state of play. So, yes, destructive and cruel behavior can be disguised as play, or can begin as play, and turn into something else. Play does have a dark side. Dogs and dolphins and chimpanzees seem to know when they are playing and when they are not; they stop short of inflicting damage. Humans seem to be more confused about this.

But play at its best, real play, joyful play, play that allows you to forget yourself – this is a beautiful thing that we dismiss too easily as irresponsible or immature or useless.

There is nothing more purposeless than completing a puzzle. When it's done, it's done. There's nothing to show for your effort, you'll never get that time back. But is it really wasting time? Brown says no. He says that puzzles keep our brains exercised and flexible. But apart from any neurological benefits, it's not time wasted if it helped us relax, if we forgot our troubles for awhile, if we had fun. Fun makes us better people – kinder, more patient, more tolerant of setbacks, more interesting and, yes, more fun to be with.

We are made to work, to be responsible, to contribute – but we are also made to have fun. Having fun – playing – reconnects us with our less cynical and jaded selves. It renews us spiritually as well as physically and psychologically. It restores the joyfulness that is our inherent right. If we don't play, something important is missing from our picture of the world. Life can be bleak, of course. It can be monotonous. It can be cruel and tragic. But it is also full of delights, beautiful, exciting and surprising, and play reminds us of this. To be fully human is to be open to this side of life as well. And to be fully human, to enjoy the full range of what we are capable of as human beings, we must remember to play. Play allows us to reconnect with our essential natures.

And what if you have forgotten how to play? Brown works with his clients to construct an individualized “play history.” By remembering moments of blissful play we knew as children, we can discover our “play personality” and look for adult ways in which to express it again. According to Brown, there are eight play personalities, but of course, we are mixtures of more than one type and we may not fit any of these.

There is the kinesthete, the person who needs to move. The one who connects to his playful self through sports, dancing, yoga or gym workouts.

There is the explorer, who is in search of new information, new feelings and new experiences, whose play is travel, study, reading, or meeting new people.

The competitor enjoys games with rules and plays to win. She likes being in charge. This person may satisfy the need to play in business or academia, in which money and perks keep score of our success.

The director also likes being in charge, but enjoys planning and organizing. They're the ones that get the party going.

The collector gets satisfaction from having the most, the best or the most unusual collection of objects or experiences.

The artist/creator plays by making things. Woodworking, gardening and painting, taking things apart and rebuilding them, building and decorating are all play.

For the storyteller, it's all about the imagination. They are the writers, the readers and the moviegoers, the performers and teachers. Even the most mundane task can be made dramatic in their imaginations.

Brown invites us to remember...What made your heart sing as a child? Was it playing hopscotch? Soccer? You may be a kinesthete who will find true joy in play that lets you move.

Was it a dollhouse? Maybe you're the artist who loves to build and decorate, or the director, in which case, you need a project, or the storyteller who enjoys creating imaginary lives, who needs to try your hand at playwriting.

Just begin, and be tolerant of your awkwardness and self-consciousness at first, as well as your lack of skill. You don't need to be good at something in order to enjoy it, and proficiency comes with practice. It is the very essence of playfulness that expectations are open and judgment is suspended.

We'll all be better off if you play. We'll all be better off if I play. Start with rediscovering the most elemental form of play, movement. Find a child to show you how to play by inviting you into his world of make-believe or games. Find other adults who want to play and don't let anyone tell you play is a silly waste of time.

In the words of Stuart Brown, "Play is how we are made... In the end, the most significant aspect of play is that it allows us to express our joy and connect most deeply with the best in ourselves and in others.... As Freud said, life is about love and work. Yet play transcends these, infuses them with liveliness and stills time's arrow. Play is the purest expression of love. When enough people raise play to the status it deserves in our lives, we will find the world a better place."

It's hard to argue with that.

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<sup>1</sup> NY: Penguin, 2009