

LIFE IS ULTIMATELY A GAMBOL!

After heavy sermons on the difficult truths of parenting and maintaining respectfulness in your new shared ministry, how about something on playfulness, which rings nicely as we celebrate Spring, warm weather, and the Memorial Day Weekend hiatus.

And yes, I want you to know, that despite the seriousness of my ministry here at San Dieguito, I'm really a playful guy, with my magic tricks, a regular tennis regimen, and a sports playing career that continues with my trying to catch my 13 year-old grandson's fastball as well as his off-speed junk.

Of all the animal species we know, the human appears unique in its capacity to continue play into adulthood. An insect rarely plays; mammals and birds play hard as youngsters, yet lose some of their playful edge in later years. But we adult humans can play right up to death...indeed play with death itself.

Frankly though, how playful are we stress-ridden, hard-driving moderns? I'm afraid not very. Like the chimpanzees we play zestfully as little ones but taper off our sense of zaniness as we reach maturity. All too often when we become adults we give up our so-called "foolish ways," considering play to be a frivolous, even irresponsible luxury. Why? Because there's always work to be done at the office or home, volunteer committees to staff, and letters to be written to congressional reps.

There's little room or time leftover for parades and balloons, games and idle chatter. We humorless crusaders forge ahead, unwilling, perhaps no longer able, to laugh, as long as injustice prevails, poverty and pollution persist, warfare continues, politics are

sexist or racist—in short, as long as there’s evil and suffering in the world...which is to say that we’re not likely to be free enough to laugh and play in the near future!

Yet daily life without a sufficient dose of fun is a puny and shriveled life indeed. For we human animals are here on earth to work and play in alternating rhythm, to engage in both business *and* monkey-business, as my tennis partner loves to say.

One of my models for balanced behavior is the famous peace activist of yesteryear, A. J. Muste. Unlike grim idealists who strain too much, Muste was never messianic, nor did he feel guilt about rounding out his existence with ample pleasure and play.

The story’s told of a young disciple’s first, awesome meeting with the master. “A. J. Muste walked in. I thought of his past revolutionary activities and his consistent courage in working to change the world. I waited eagerly for his first word. A.J. looked around, then immediately asked, ‘How did the Dodgers make out yesterday?’ I was shocked,” laments the follower.

Now I may be sorry that Muste was a diehard Dodger fan, we’ll have to forgive him that, but he was, to my delight, one who truly juggled self-care and activism, both playing and laboring all his days. He knew that joy and justice are yoked in the robust life! Too many of us languish in the extremes of workaholism and/or couch-potatoism, and consequently, lead lopsided, compulsive, unfulfilled lives.

Fortunately, in recent years, there seems to be a resurgence of physical activity and fitness among Americans, of all ages. This just wasn’t the case decades ago. My Dad, for example, athletic as a youth and collegian, gave up tennis when he reached forty.

That was simply the unwritten rule of the day, no matter the state of your body. After a set age, you turned in your play equipment and exercised only on rare occasions, like playing touch football with your kids in the backyard on Thanksgiving Day. Utterly out of shape, you woke up the next morning with sore limbs, an aching back, and a resolve to quit such childish behavior until next Thanksgiving Day.

But today, those of us in our thirties on up into our eighties are staying physically active. Of course, there still exist those among us who agree with author Fran Lebowitz who quipped: “You can call it jogging if you want; you can call it tennis if you want, I call it gym. And I don’t have to go anymore, so I don’t!”

Thankfully, that attitude is increasingly in the minority where 50+% of all Americans say they engage in some form of physical exercise, indoors or outdoors, double the number in 1961. And there’s no sign of slowdown. Even greater activity is forecast among the children coming along after us, which is crucial since the eating habits of too many youngsters are atrocious and countless numbers are glued to passive video entertainment. Indeed, child obesity is a *huge* problem!

Yoga, swimming, going to the health spa, working out on your stairmaster at home, cycling, skiing, bowling, mountain climbing, skate-boarding, fast-walking, on and on run the endless varieties of physical activities enjoyed by Americans. Most everyone who has a body now realizes that she or he is inescapably, in some sense, born to exercise and built to play, be it as basic as lubricating one’s joints through simple and regular motion.

In the Sun Belt, better weather allows us to share in a year-round festival of play. San Diego has been declared the sports participation capital of the world by *Sports*

Illustrated, and so it is, contrary to what Angeleno sports writer, Jim Murray, used to say about us:

San Diego is a body of land surrounded on two sides by water, on two sides by mountains, and on all sides by apathy. There are two things to do in San Diego. You can go to the zoo or you can join the navy.

Pooh on Murray, although he was a great sports writer. In truth, we San Diegans run counter to the old Protestant work ethic which dictates that “you can either work or you can have a good time but you can’t do both.” Well, we San Diegans do both. We dare to have a good time. For all work and no play not only makes Jack a dull boy and Jill a boring girl, it also means we don’t live as long or contribute as much to society.

So, everyday, usually in the early morning, Carolyn and I walk or go to the gym. I don’t run as much anymore, but I play tennis every week. Daily I try to average 8-10,000 steps on my pedometer. My life simply doesn’t taste or flow right, when I haven’t exerted or exercised sufficiently each day. A body in motion produces vigor of mind and spirit.

However, as with any passion, play can degenerate into an obsession. Some folks work grimly at their play. Consequently, their fun can become ambitious, combative, and even violent.

It’s tempting, isn’t it, to fall into the trap where we worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship, when the healthiest rhythm is to work at work, play at play, and worship at worship, with occasional mixes and crossovers...like this morning with some magic tricks to loosen us up a bit, so we take this precious life seriously but never grimly.

So to keep a healthy balance in our spiritual journeys, I have a few other things to share on the theology of playfulness. These notions work, whoops, I mean play, well for me in my life, and may prove useful tips to you as an adult and or a parent.

First, play is not only a year-round proposition; it's a lifetime invitation. This means we can't just assume a playful demeanor when we reach 21. We have to start as children and stay in practice all along life's path. Our Unitarian Universalist religion contends that playing is as crucial as praying, whether alone or in a group. Play isn't just an extra but an essential from the moment we roll out of the womb.

Do you know what a 19th century church school policy statement of a mainline faith stated about their education program?

We prohibit play in the strongest terms. Let this rule be observed with strictest nicety. For those who play when they are young will play when they are old.

Wow, you bet they will. That's precisely the developmental path we want our children to walk. It's hard to believe that any American religion could have ever been so restrictive and stifling. Yet when I realize in my own lifetime that laughter, dancing and fun have all been labeled off-bounds, even sinful, especially in church, one isn't too surprised then, by the early Sunday School prohibition on play. On the contrary, for religious liberals, our church is one place where all ages can learn to share our whole beings in relaxation, rest, renewal, **and** recreation.

In German the term for blessedness is *seelisch* and is etymologically related to our word "silly", reminding us serious types that in order to be blessed we need to become irrepressible practitioners of silliness. Additionally, the word enthusiasm means "God-filled," so as we creatures demonstrate exuberance and joy, our lives exude divinity.

You know what? I've long forgotten most of the precise content of my religious education, and I bet you have too, as will our children here at San Dieguito, but I've never forgotten that our minister, Walt Robie, let us spend time chasing one another around the church grounds, throwing frisbees on the front lawn, singing spirituals around our retreat campfires in the mountains, and playing scary (not hurtful) games in the bowels of the basement. Thank you, Reverend Robie for teaching me that religion and play are mates.

In fact, although it's not written down formally, our children shouldn't be able to graduate from our RE programs here at the Fellowship unless they've spent sufficient time horsing around. Playing with arts and crafts, playing hide-and-go-seek, playing at intergenerational gatherings like those held at de Benneville, your beach parties and campouts, playing at overnights and retreats, playing every imaginable game from Picture Charades to volleyball to spontaneous, fabricated ones without names or rules.

We want our children to play madly and steadily with objects, ideas, and values, with their peers and adult mentors of this, their chosen spiritual tribe. We want them to laugh so wildly sometimes that they nearly fall on the floor.

One of the special memories of my entire ministry has been New Year's Eve parties where we encouraged children, youth, and adults to come together and play all kinds of games of mutual appeal, and where any one could dance with anyone else, playing different generations of music to stretch us all. Do you realize that too few children ever get to experience adults having safe, raw fun, and too few adults ever experience children doing the same?

It sure seems to me that our congregation, the premier pan-generational place in town, should model playing all our live-long days. Sarah McCarthy puts it compellingly: “We must get in touch with our own liberating ludicrousness and practice being harmlessly deviant.” That’s the function of a healthy beloved community such as San Dieguito, isn’t it? To balance justice and joy, service and silliness for all ages, all the way home.

I feel that I’m lucky to have realized that when I hang up my robe, two of my primary ways of moving in the world will be singing in nursing homes and performing magic tricks for elementary schoolers. And I’m getting ready, you bet I am, because most every day I go to my *Meryloft* to sing songs, accompanying myself on the guitar, as well as soak in magic tricks.

I’m slowly but surely becoming a card-carrying Merrymaker: a wizard of wow and wonderment. In fact, when I did a show recently for 2nd graders in East San Diego, I told them to call me Mr. Tom, Mr. Joy or Mr. Fun, nothing fancier than that. I’ll be a reverend all my days, but “Mr. Joy” will be on my cards when I graduate from work.

Magic’s amazing, since it allows me to amuse myself as well as occasionally enchant both little and elder ones. At my age, magic is one of those rare activities that fills my soul to the overflowing and brings a smile to those around me. For doing something magical isn’t a means to an end; it’s an end in itself.

And so, my friends: remember that we’re playful animals by nature. We were created to stomp and holler, laugh and dance, just for the hell of it, as well as the health of it. We’re here on earth, among other things simply to play for play’s sake: not to play with a why in mind, or with an opponent, or with a finish line...just play for play’s sake,

because that's who we are. We're *homo ludens*—playful, frolicking, fun-loving creatures—and we forget our god-given condition at great peril both to ourselves and to the cosmos itself.

Pablo Casals, in his elder years, got up every morning to play the piano, not to show off his prowess, although his gifts were enormous, not merely to keep physically active and mentally sharp, although that was part of his ritual too. Most importantly, I believe Casals played, and we play every day, because we play to live or is it live to play? It doesn't really matter, for life and playfulness go together, from cradle to grave, at least, in any full-service religion that I ever want to be a part of.

I may have told you this story before, but it doesn't matter, since it's so compelling, that it demands retelling. It's a charming story that describes how the Christian scriptures were translated from English into the Eskimo or Inuit language and it captures the heart of my sermon today on the theology of play.

Problems arose for the translator when they encountered certain words in English for which there were no corresponding words in the Inuit language. For example, there's a passage that tells that the disciples are filled with joy upon meeting Jesus. But since there's no word for "joy" in the Inuit language, the translator had to find another way to express the meaning of the passage.

In their research, they discovered that one of the most joyful times for an Inuit family is when the sled dogs are fed in the evening. The dogs come barking and yelping, bounding about and wagging their tails furiously. The children squeal with delight, and the neighbors join the communion as well.

Consequently, the translators used that particular event to help convey the meaning of the aforementioned biblical text. As a result, when the passage was translated back into English, it read: “When the disciples saw Jesus, they wagged their tails!”

Well, there you have it. Our earthly assignment is to bark and yelp wildly, wagging our tails as furiously as possible, so that our joy might prove catching and all creatures of the universe might sing and dance, jumping around in life’s perpetual celebration of playfulness.

Tom Owen-Towle
May 24, 2009