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 Arlington Street Church
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Play

Last week, someone drove down the Boylston Street alley and accidentally took the side view mirror of my Jeep with them. They accidentally forgot to leave a note, too. It's okay; I love an excuse to do business with Charlie Lee at Prospect Auto Body. I call and say, "Hi, Charlie, it's Kim," and he says, "Hi, Kim. How are you?" And then, without missing a beat – and it doesn't matter how long it's been since the last time my car got wrecked – he says, "Jeep Liberty, 2012, black. How can I help?" I'm pretty sure that if my heart were broken instead of my mirror, Charlie would say the same thing he always says: "Come on over. I'll take care of you."

So I'm at Charlie's shop, waiting for my new side view mirror, making my way through a pile of snail mail, sitting next to someone, coincidentally, whose Prius looks suspiciously like it might have sideswiped a black Jeep and taken off the side view mirror. He sees an envelope addressed to the church and asks me, of all questions, why I belong to a church. I refrain from saying, "I like hanging out with the kind of people who would have left a note on my windshield." Instead, I launch into our mission – love, service, justice, peace – and our covenant to build the beloved community." And he says, "O, you're so lucky to have playmates!"

So now I realize he's one sandwich short of a picnic, but the price of my new mirror has also bought me this gift: I wonder, What *about* play – what the dictionary defines as "pleasurable and apparently purposeless activity" – play, for no ends but joy? What about play as a spiritual practice?

I turned to the work of Donald Winnicott, British pediatrician and psychoanalyst,¹ who believed that play is "the key to emotional and psychological wellbeing," and fosters our "capacity for being – the ability to

¹ Thanks to Katherine Hazzard for research assistance!

feel genuinely alive.” By play, he meant not just child’s play, but the ways we play as adults – creating and discovering, making music and art, reading, pursuing our hobbies, playing sports, or – and here’s the sweet stretch – visiting, and talking and laughing together. He saw play at any age as “crucial to the development of authentic selfhood, because when people play, we’re keenly engaged in what we’re doing, and we feel real – spontaneous and alive. At play, we are our ‘true selves.’”²

From Dr. Winnicott, I dove headlong into the work of Dr. Stuart Brown,³ who was a workaholic physician until age 63, when he founded the National Institute for Play, on a mission to bring “the unrealized knowledge, practices, and benefits of play into public life.”⁴

You’ll never believe how he got there.

Enter the tragedy of Charles Whitman. Raised in a devout Roman Catholic family, Charles Whitman was the youngest boy in the world to become an Eagle Scout, and grew up to be a Marine Corpsman, engineering student, and scout leader. And then, on August 1st, 1966, in Austin, Texas, he killed seventeen people, including his wife and his mother,⁵ perpetrating what was then the largest mass murder in the history of the United States.

Dr. Stuart Brown’s residency in neurology and psychiatry had included some studies of violence; he says, “and because in August, in Texas, most people who are important are elsewhere, I was put in charge of ... trying to figure out why Charles Whitman [committed] this horrendous crime.”

Experts from around the world converged and studied everything about Charles Whitman there was to study. Dr. Brown explains, “[W]ithout going through that entire story, one of the major conclusions ... was that a remarkably systematic suppression of any free play – ... largely the result of

² Please see wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Winnicott

³ Thanks to Kem Morehead for research assistance!

⁴ from Krista Tippett’s interview with Dr. Stuart Brown, “Play, Spirit, and Character,” *On Being*, 6/18/14. Quotations from Dr. Brown are from this interview. Dr. Brown’s book is *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul*.

⁵ Charles Whitman was 25 years old at the time of the murders. He wounded an additional thirty-one people.

his father's overbearing and intense personality – prevented Charles Whitman from [ever having engaged] in normal play.”

Even more astonishing, it turned out that the clearest connection among the lives of highly violent men is *not having been allowed to play*. A team studied all the young murderers who were not career criminals, but whose crime was homicide, and found that the vast majority of them – on the order of ninety percent – had, in Dr. Brown's words, “really bizarre, absent, deficient, seriously deviant play histories.”

As a rule, it's not that, without play, we'll become mass murderers. It's just that, without play, life becomes a kind of “endurance contest;” the essence – the sweetness – is missing. When we are deprived of play, says Stuart Brown – we being both human and non-human animals – we are “fixed and rigid in [our] responses to complex stimuli. [We] don't have a repertoire of choices that are as broad as [our] intelligence should allow [us] to have. [We don't understand irony. We experience depression. We lack adaptability.] And [we] don't seek out novelty and newness, which is ... an essential aspect of play ... [enabling] us to cope in a world of many demands...”

Dr. Jane Goodall, the world's foremost authority on chimpanzees, says, “Play teaches young animals what they can and cannot do at a time when they are relatively free from the survival pressures of adult life.” Dr. Bob Fagen, who studies bears, says, “They play because it's fun,” but, when pressed, adds, “In a world continuously presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares them for an evolving planet.” And Dr. Stuart Brown concludes, “... [At] least for the last two hundred thousand years or so, our capacity as a species to adapt, whether we're in the Arctic or the tropics, the desert of a rain forest, appears ... to be related significantly to our capacity ... to play.... Play equips [us] to live in the world.” His studies of humans conclude that “the rough-and-tumble play of children ... [actually] prevents violent behavior, ... [and] can grow human talents and character.... [Play,]” he says, “can be a glimpse of the divine.”

A glimpse of the divine.... We can say yes to play because it's good for us; it's good for us as individuals, and as a society. But, as Dr. Brown says it, “a little guilt-free purposelessness” is also good for our souls. Bob Fagen has made his home in Alaska and hung out in tress for hour upon hour, year after year, just watching bears play. Having immersed himself in the study

of play, he’s experienced a kind of “osmosis” or “permission” to play, and has “a kind of ... spiritual aesthetic about play that permeates his life, ... a certain quality of optimism and compassion....”

So what about play as a spiritual practice? Play proffers a deeply restorative “timelessness and freedom.” If we reflect on how we played as kids, if we can summon up those sensual, visceral memories – everything so heightened and time stretched out over long afternoons and into the evening – we can tap into experiences that gave us a kind of pure joy. The mere act of remembering – the profound immersion in whatever we were doing or making or just being – opens a kind of spaciousness in our hearts and reminds us of who we were, and who we are. And that’s the point: now – perhaps now, as much as ever – we need play.

Two summers ago, Kem and I took nine teenagers backpacking into the Grand Canyon – kids whose lives have been literally programmed for success from Mozart playing to them in the womb to playdates and gymnastics and ballet and music lessons and soccer and lots and lots of school: so precious little time just to play. We hiked into the blazing heat of the desert, crossed the Colorado River, and set them loose in Bright Angel Creek, where they spent hours and hours building a dam to make a swimming hole – a spa, really; and then on up to Phantom Creek, where they jumped from a high ledge and splashed into the pool below; and farther up to Ribbon Falls, where they sat under the cascading water, shrieking with the shock of the cold and undiluted delight. In the evening, they cooked together, played simple card games and guessing games, rolled out their sleeping bags under the stars, and slept so deeply.

After a week, as we hiked back up and out to the rim under the supermoon of that long-ago June, one of them said, “I want to stay in the Canyon forever,” and another said, “I’m not really made for the world.” But the truth is, they were readier for the world than they’d ever been, and carrying out more than their packs; they were carrying the bone-deep knowledge of a way to restore themselves, a way – when they were physically, emotionally, and spiritual depleted – to fill the well again.

Beloved spiritual companions, play is “the key to emotional and psychological wellbeing.”⁶ When we’re keenly engaged in what we’re doing, we feel real – spontaneous and alive; at play, we are our “true selves.”⁷

May we make music and art, read, pursue our hobbies, play sports,
talk and laugh together.

May we circle back in memory to play we have loved,
and then make new memories of

“pleasurable and apparently purposeless activity:”

play for no ends but joy,
play as a spiritual practice,
play as immersion in the divine.

Beloved playmates,
Ally-ally-in-free!

⁶ Dr. Stuart Brown, *op cit*

⁷ Dr. Donald Winnicott, *op cit*