

“Adults at Play”
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One of life’s greatest gifts is something only some of us receive, if we are fortunate. It is the understanding that we have choices: choices, from the attitude we take toward any given situation to basic choices about how we live our lives. Those of us who recognize that we need to choose our path know that we must often fly in the face of what society tells us about how we should be in the world. We know that what our society values and what a spiritual seeker must value are often at odds.

Society draws us into a realm of productivity, materialism and rigid roles. As adults, we should take ourselves and whatever we do seriously. Many of us lead busy lives and as we focus on checking off as many things as possible on our to-do lists each day, we can forget to laugh, to lighten up, to see the humor and absurdity of things all around us. Emerson said, “It is a happy talent to know how to play.” He understood that in order to be balanced and spiritually open, we need a playful attitude.

Playfulness is an approach to living that I think can benefit us enormously. I’ve seen how it has worked in my own life. I have an image that I don’t think I’ll ever forget. It was March of 2001. I had just met with the UUA’s Ministerial Fellowship Committee up in Boston. For anyone who doesn’t know who they are, they are the group of people who interviews each candidate for the ministry to discern whether or not they are ready to move ahead and apply for a ministry position.

For me, it was a pivotal point which came after working very hard over the course of 7 years to prepare. After a wait that seemed to last forever, someone came out and invited me back into the circle of MFC members, where I was told that I had received a “1,” meaning that I had “passed” with flying colors.

I had an appointment in about 2 hours with John Weston, who was the director of settlement for the UUA. So I headed outside. If you’ve ever been to the UUA, you know that it’s adjacent to the Boston Common, or at least it was until their

recent move. The Boston Common is a large open park, with paths criss-crossing everywhere and an artificial pond only a few inches deep called the “Frog Pond.”

There were snow flurries in the air, but the temperature wasn’t bad, and I headed to the pond. Being March, it was ice skating season. Lots of people were skating around and around. I rented a pair of skates and joined them. Everyone was smiling and laughing, including me. Of course, I was on cloud nine because I had gotten a “1” from the MFC, but I remember also feeling like all of us, young and old, it was like we were all kids, just having a great time. I remember feeling SO happy, that it really was a spiritual experience.

I’m convinced that young children are spiritual beings. As children, we are open and trusting, caught up in the moment, “going with the flow” of things. Everything is new and special. And we haven’t yet learned to censor ourselves. Our inner critic hasn’t developed yet. If we think back, I’m guessing that most of us can remember a time when we were completely absorbed, engaged in the experience, and feeling that joie de vivre, that simple delight. Maybe we were dancing to some music. Maybe it was squatting in the mud and making mud pies. Some of us liked to draw or paint. Or perhaps we were just lying in the grass, looking up at the clouds.

I can picture some of those moments as a kid. But there came a time in my life when everything seemed to be serious. I was overwhelmed by problems: problems with my two kids, problems with my marriage, and problems with the congregation I served. I remember seeing a therapist who asked me, “So, what do you do for fun?” I knew this was a bad sign, but I could not think of a single thing! I had always been a fun-loving person, but I had completely lost that part of myself.

Eventually, I began to figure out what I needed to do in order to live a happy life. Some of the problems either went away or I figured out what I needed to do about them, but of course, other problems appeared in their place. Funny how that happens. But I was learning to keep my problems in perspective. Part of that was not obsessing over them, and another part was focusing on the many, many things for which I could be grateful. See, these are examples of making choices that some very wise people in my life were helping me to understand. Before, I had no idea that I could actually choose my thoughts.

The third part of keeping my problems in perspective was re-discovering my playful self. Another memory pops into my mind. After I was no longer serving the congregation in Connecticut, I took a job with my brother's company, doing financial counseling. My sister-in-law worked there too, and I think there was something about being with family members that helped me feel more comfortable with being myself.

One day we decided to re-arrange all the furniture in the office, including some heavy filing cabinets. I asked my sister-in-law how we could move them. The office had wall-to-wall carpeting and she assured me it would be easy. All we had to do was to slip some FedEx envelopes under them. So I got out a couple of the envelopes and set them on the floor next to one of the cabinets. I put my foot on one of the envelopes and slid on it a little bit to test it out, to see how "slidy" it was. Then I put my other foot on the other envelope and started skating all around the office! Everyone started laughing, including me. But you know what? It was so much fun! It was like something got released in me.

THIS is how I want to live, I decided. I want to laugh –laugh at myself, laugh at the crazy situations I find myself in every day, to be silly, to PLAY. And I do. And I am a pretty happy person. I am playful every chance I get. Becoming playful is one of the best choices I've ever made.

Playfulness relieves stress; it refreshes our minds and bodies; it can even help us heal from physical and psychic wounds. These are all important benefits. For us as religious seekers, play is also important as a doorway to spiritual experience, as it allows our egos to fall away and lets us become completely absorbed in the moment. Intuition, imagination and creativity all require playfulness, and a suspension of judgment and an attitude of openness to whatever may come. When we create from this playful place, some would say that we become co-creators with the universe, because our consciousness expands and becomes receptive to input that seems to come from beyond ourselves. Maybe it does and maybe it doesn't, but the result is the same. Creation is happening in the universe, and we're contributing to that.

We need play to stimulate our imaginations and we need imagination to play. And sometimes two heads are better than one. As many of you know, Gene and I

are getting married this coming Saturday. One of the many things I love about Gene is that we both love to play, and we feed off each other.

We laugh easily, which encourages both of us to joke around even more. These days, I laugh more than I've ever laughed in my life. My inner child is alive and well.

I think the spirit of playfulness is something that can be cultivated. The more we can embrace the idea of living life lightly, without taking things overly seriously, and the more we practice playfulness, the more it becomes an integral part of who we are.

Leo Buscaglia, one of the most playful people I've ever heard of, once said, "I am often accused of being childish. I prefer to interpret that as child-like. I still get wildly enthusiastic about little things...I play with leaves. I skip down the street and run against the wind. I never water my garden without soaking myself. It has been after such times of joy that I have achieved my greatest creativity and produced my best work."

If Leo Buscaglia's way of life sounds too silly to you, I want to challenge you to try it before you knock it. What is there to be afraid of? So you make a fool of yourself. It's good for you! "Playing around is a good and holy thing. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise." That from Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat.

We, all of us, seek wholeness. Rediscovering our playful selves is a way we can reclaim the spirit of our inner child, who, as it turns out, we need more than we may have ever thought. Because it is through those child's eyes that we once again experience the world as new, we find a lightness of being, and we make our lives richer than we ever thought possible. Make the courageous choice to love that child within you. Choose to let it out. And let it show you the delightful world that we sometimes forget is with us always. Let it set our imaginations and thus, our spirits, free.