

10 or 12 years ago I was in NYC visiting my oldest daughter. We were seeing the sites and I had my two youngest with me who were like 7 and 5. We decided to give them a break and we went into Central Park. I don't know central park all that well and so I cannot tell you where we were in it. But there was this huge outcropping of granite. And there were kids all over it running up and down it. I let my two youngest go to play with the other kids. They did. And it occurred to me how easily children play with one another. All you need is a big rock, or a lawn, or a ball or each other. We adults we have lost that, mostly haven't we?

When I worked as a family therapist and worked with children I often would use play in my therapy with them. Often there was this tension between my methodology as a therapist and the parents views on what should be happening. I would hear something like – why are you playing with our kiddo? They can do that at home. We are taking time and money to bring our child here we expect you to do something significant with them. And so, part of my therapy with that child was helping the parents understand that their child was not a little adult and that play is how children learn, how they feel safe, how they express themselves.

Think back to your childhood, or ponder the childhood of the children around you. Play is how they learn is it not? Our children will mimic us as a way of learning. Sometimes that is a lovely mirror of one's self. To see your child, welcome the newcomer with a smile and an offer of shared food. How lovely we think that that child learned that from me. And sometimes the mirror is not so kind. In my first pastorate I came home one evening to find my child had placed all her dolls and stuffies in a semi-circle and was leading them in a meeting.

Whether we like the mirror our children provide or not they need to play and so do we

From the book "Sacred Play" Diane Ackerman writes

"For humans, play is a refuge from ordinary life, a sanctuary of the mind, where one is exempt from life's customs, methods, and decrees. Play always has a sacred place—some version of a playground—in which it happens. The hallowed ground is usually outlined, so that it's clearly set off from the rest of reality. This place may be a classroom, a sports stadium, a stage, a courtroom, a coral reef, a workbench in a garage, a church or temple, a field where people clasp hands in a circle under the new moon. Play has a time limit, which may be an intense but fleeting moment, the flexible innings of a baseball game, or the exact span of a psychotherapy session. ... The world of play favors exuberance, license, abandon. Shenanigans are allowed, strategies can be tried, selves can be revised. In the self-enclosed world of play, there is no hunger. It is its own goal, which it reaches in a richly satisfying way."

And if you think that only children play – or only humans play think back to my reading from Wendell Barry. The great blue heron at play. I did not know of great blue herons until I got to know some of the lakes around here. They are stately beings absolutely silent in

flight. A great blue heron will perch on an old log looking over a body of water as if it is the keeper of that lake. Even the young ones look old and wise. And when they take flight you see just how huge their wings are and how silent they fly. These are not animals I would think would play – and yet they do. I have seen crows play, ducks play, seagulls play, squirrels play. Animals play.

It is easy to unintentionally anthropomorphize animals which I do not want to do. I will not and cannot speak to why the animal plays. I can only speak to how pervasive play is in our world. And I can speak to why we play.

Again, from Diane Ackerman

“Whichever word you choose—rapture or ecstasy—each is fundamental to the notion of deep play. So is transcendence, risk, obsession, pleasure, distractedness, timelessness, and a sense of the holy or sacred”

Deep play is engagement in an activity so consuming so filling that time slips away. You feel at once with the activity and with yourself. You do not feel separate from the activity or from creation. There is a flow to this.

Play opens us to the sacred. Have you ever had that experience where you have been living out of your to do list for too long. Your spirit feels tired and brittle – there has been too much adulting for too long. On that very adult list of tasks is garden work – finally the weather and your free time align and you throw yourself into getting all the things done and instead of simply clearing the to-do list of tasks you find yourself moving your body, sweating in the sun, getting your hands into the dirt, smelling the garden feeling the garden, hearing the garden and when you finally step back, or sit down suddenly the beauty of it all breaks through, into your very soul. That is flow and that is the sacred.

Leonard Cohen in his song Anthem wrote  
Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in

Play helps to open that crack that lets the light in. That lets the sacred in. Or perhaps it lets us in – in a way that allows us to see the sacred that has always been there

“Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (Me High Cheek sent me high) has written about “flow,” a term commonly used by his research subjects to describe a mood of effortless enjoyment. Karl Groos and G. Murphy wrote about the special pleasure that comes from using one’s body and senses to the fullest. Sartre, Heraclitus, Plato, and Nietzsche have emphasized the

appeal of control and freedom in play. ... Maslow wrote of “peak experiences ... of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, the greatest joy,” transcendent states that also include “awe, mystery, complete perfection, humility, surrender, and worship.” ... The spirit of deep play is central to the life of each person, and also to society, inspiring the visual, musical, and verbal arts; “

This idea of play and flow have been written about since forever. Sometimes we adults don't see it because

We don't call it play. We call it singing, we call it painting, we call it cooking, quilting, sculpting, gardening. In this society of ours where we have lost the ability to value play we cannot call these things play because somehow that diminishes them. And that is so wrong. Play is a gift, from the gods, from the sacred.

When we live out of a place of fear, of scarcity we say there is not time for play. We must be all work, work, work. And that my friends is all the isms of the world working among us. Racist, misogynist, classist power structures working against us. My Christian friends would say that is evil. Yes, we must work, yes we must build the Beloved community. And we must bring the sacred into that, we must bring the power of love into that. If we do not it is hollow. If we do not it is an anxiety driven attempt to salve our own souls. If we do not bring the sacred love of this world into our work then we are not fixing the world we are breaking the world.

Allowing the sacred into your life is the work of justice. Sacred play grows us, sustains us, nurtures us. And we know that in this congregation.

Justice with Love and Joy open to Awe – that is our mission statement. Did you all realize that you wrote sacred play into that statement. Because where does love and joy and awe come from if it is not from playing with the sacred.

Maslow wrote of “peak experiences ... of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, the greatest joy,” transcendent states that also include “awe, mystery, complete perfection, humility, surrender, and worship.

There is a reason why we have potlucks and game nights and music gatherings and yes worship services on Sundays and other days. It is not to avoid the horribleness of this world. It is not to ignore the call to build Beloved Community. It is not a distraction. It is to crack us open so that we can be filled with the sacred love that powers this world.

Like the Grasshopper and the Ants when we gather together and play we are opened to what connects us and not divides us. We are connected to the sacred within us and among us.

When we play, deeply play, when we open ourselves to the sacred, to the power of love we are made new. We are strengthened and emboldened. We are affirmed and recreated. We are made new for the Beloved community. Joyfully we will bend that arc of justice.