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PLAY: SENSING INFINITE POSSIBILITIES, DESIRING TO BE LIMITLESS

We should pass our lives in the playing of games . . . with the result of ability to gain heaven's grace.

—Plato, *Laws*

Are we having fun yet? The question contains an internal contradiction. It puts the questioner within a time framework (at a point in time when there is expectation or hope of having fun, whereas previously fun wasn't happening), while on the contrary, the very nature of fun and the playfulness that creates it is that they're creative, spontaneous, unreflective, and essentially outside of the flow of time. When we genuinely play and have fun, we aren't aware of the passage of time. Play is free of the expectations that cause us to predetermine the kind of experiences we'll have. As long as we wonder about having fun, we can't have much. In true play, which adults rarely engage in, we're unbounded by the limits of time, space, and identity. Thus, a child can be an astronaut, then a mom or dad, a dinosaur or firefighter, all without the hindrance of self-consciousness.

Play needn't be humorous, but real humor is always playful. Something that's funny often juxtaposes things that don't belong together, and this opens a breach in the expected order of things, vindicating our innate sense that all things are possible. We're momentarily enchanted, giddy, out of our minds—"mindless" in the sense of the Buddhist "no-mind." This juxtaposing of antithetical things makes humor quintessentially paradoxical.

Play, itself paradoxical, constitutes an essential part of human behavior because it allows us, for a while, to transgress the limits of our world that restrict us to being finite. Play offers a glimpse of exciting, uncontrolled, and endless potentials, providing a porous interface that lets

in regenerative energy from our infinite self. Having finite and infinite aspects that are not fully integrated creates tension and a painful sense of absurdity. Finite human existence seems absurd if a person intuitively feels the infinite self without understanding the actual relationship of the infinite to the finite. Tension dissolves in the paradox of play and humor; laughter releases the stress of nonintegration, and absurdity shifts from painful to hilarious. Humor lets the interface breathe.

In *Homo Ludens* ("Man the Player"), Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) defines play as activity that involves freedom, creates order, and isn't a part of ordinary life but is set apart in time and space. Distinct from normal life, play has direction and meaning unto itself. "Into an imperfect world . . . it brings a temporary, a limited perfection."¹ Huizinga asserts that play is a fundamental, irreducible aspect of our nature and as such lies at the bedrock of culture, ritual (and therefore religion), and creativity—even business enterprise, scientific and philosophical investigation, and the legal system.² He wonders whether reasoning itself involves play and its rules and finds medieval university scholarly life and modern learned disputation to be, fundamentally but not pejoratively, game playing.³

Both playground and sacred ground are places to experience and try out that which flows from the deepest, highest part of self, however attenuated and unrecognizable it is when expressed. "Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. . . . [Both are] hallowed, within which special rules obtain." He quotes the poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945): "No skepticism is possible where the rules of a game are concerned, for the principle underlying them is an unshakable truth."⁴ Huizinga sees an ancient and exalted purpose in play: "In the form and function of play, itself an independent entity which is senseless and irrational, man's consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest, and holiest expression."⁵ Thus, finite self, all too often constrained and trapped by its own beliefs and certainties, reminds itself in play that it's embedded in a larger existence and within the rules of play can safely throw off its normal constraints for a while and taste unlimited freedom. A door opens to the boundless resources of the infinite, for while the time for play or ritual is limited, its effect is not; it has changed things. Play takes us both inward to our eternal spiritual center and outward spherically from it to experience the infinite field of alternative potentials that surrounds linear time.

Naturalists report play among species as diverse as wolves and ravens. This might seem to contradict the idea that play is a means for human beings to experience acting as individual infinite selves. No teaching to my knowledge maintains that animals have individual in-

finite selves. However, it has been suggested that animals have species infinite selves, an idea that has parallels in Native American religions, among others; these talk about the “spirit” of buffalo, of coyote, or any species. Whether individual or group, this spiritual self is the spirit of play, so to speak, and, in fact, we speak of a spirited game or of jests or antics arising from being in high spirits. For animal or human beings, when energy and time are available beyond that necessary for survival needs, play—activity that yields no benefit as regards life’s immediate mundane requirements—will occur.

The Divine at Play

The impulse to create a playful order is divine, as indicated by the idea of the cosmic learning game, and human beings have always seen divinity as creating or maintaining order in the world while remaining somewhat aloof and free to override its rules. Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) has his version of this game: “man ... has been constructed as a toy for God, and this is, in fact, the finest thing about him. All of us, then, men and women alike, must fall in with our role and spend life in making our *play* as perfect as possible. ... What, then, is our right course? We should pass our lives in the playing of games ... with the result of ability to gain heaven’s grace.”⁶ Thus play, far from frivolous, is a sacred and momentous endeavor.

Fun is always in some measure playful, although play is not necessarily fun. (Holy ritual is a form of play.⁷) Fun of any kind involves the unexpected. We can have fun exploring, trying new things, meeting new people, or just hanging out, open to whatever. It’s fun if, by our choosing (for fun and play must involve our active volition or at minimum our tacit assent), we’ve cracked open the shell of our accustomed experience enough that something may enter that will change our lives, at least a little. Most important, something is fun if it opens us to the untamed, free realm of infinite self, so that we feel assured we can still contact it, which amounts to contact with life itself. (This realm can also scare us half to death, which can also be fun.)

In play, a person can create completely new life scenarios (children may do this several times an hour), analogously to infinite self creating the life of finite self. As the one who plays, she experiences herself as the unchanged creator; she can then leave behind the identity she assumed and move on, knowing who she continues to be, ready to create new identities for new games. Play confirms that she engages in, but is not wholly of, the finite world or trapped by time or the law of cause and effect.

Play and art are essentially alike. Huizinga sees play as strongly connected to aesthetic activity, which he suggests might be the same as the inclination to fashion structures embodying order, an urge that gives life to play in every form.⁸ Like a child at play, an actor or fiction writer can breathe life into a character, inhabit it, allow it to freely develop, and feel it spontaneously mature outside his conscious intent, so much so that it may create the artist while he creates it.⁹ This is exactly what we do as infinite selves—we enter into and give freedom to characters we create (our finite selves) with which we then have reciprocally influencing relationships. Finite self is infinite self's means to be at play in the cosmos. Play is the work of the divine in finite incarnation.

Huizinga states that play exists beyond the dualities “of wisdom and folly . . . of truth and falsehood, good and evil.”¹⁰ It gives us an experience of resolving such dualities. In play we not only reconcile to some degree our finiteness with our innate if unconscious sense of infinite possibilities and desire to be limitless; playfully we also move from duality to polarity and create a richer, healthier relationship between the polarities of finite existence.

Our culture has confused play with entertainment and distraction, which by design take the consumer away from himself and his stresses and concerns. Entertainment is in many ways the opposite of play; while stimulating, it removes the consumer from his center or at least gets him no closer. It serves to numb discomforts and distract from an unfulfilling, unhealthy life that's not focused on higher-order needs such as aesthetic or spiritual pursuits. Play helps a person identify his core needs. It awakens the participant; at its best, it challenges his perspectives, beliefs, and sense of identity. It takes energy and focus but is regenerative, refreshing, and restorative. When other people are involved, play is interactive; entertainment often isn't, such as that involving a performer and a passive audience. Of course, some entertainment contains elements of play, but true play is never merely entertaining. Real playfulness in adults is often dishonored and mistrusted as childish.

Play is serious business for children; it's a primary means for self-discovery, exploring the world, and developing skills. Adults have a grave need to relearn playfulness in its unconstrained creativity and serious lightheartedness and to distinguish play from frivolity, entertainment, or being silly. (We speak of the play of light on something but not of the silliness or frivolousness of light.) Our long work hours, the complexity of modern living, and the dulling effects of most entertainment alienate us from ourselves, draining energy needed for play. To rediscover what nourishes and balances us and to divine our spiritual nature, we

must recognize the inanity and fruitlessness of what we give significant amounts of time and energy to and get down to the important job of playing. A child's wonder, founded in her experience of the infinite within, finds renewal in the adult as reverence for creation, centeredness in the deep self, freedom of expression, and a sense of ever-expanding possibilities. As finite selves, our play's the thing that creates a bridge back to our infinite selves.

Notes

1. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 7-10.
2. *Ibid.*, 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 152, 156.
4. *Ibid.*, 10, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 17.
6. Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (1961; reprint with corrections, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 1375, *Laws* VII:803.
7. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 14.
8. *Ibid.*, 10.
9. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (1975; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, Harper Colophon Books, 1977), 12.
10. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 6.