

## *Deep Play*

Unitarian Universalist Society of Schenectady

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Rev. Dr. Lynn Ashley

On the cover of your order of service is a copy of a photograph of blue-footed boobies. I first saw this photo on the bottom of page one of the New York Times. It was in one of those across-the-bottom pieces associated with featured articles. The same photo was also on the home page of the Times website that day. “How to explain the blue-footed boobies in such prominent locations in the Times,” the author of the page two ‘story behind the story’ had asked: ‘Why this feature) *amid stories about presidential smears, conspiracy theories, sexist attacks and ... (whatever was the tweet of the day)?*’

The editor responsible for selecting stories accorded such prominence had responded that it was important to surface stories that offer ‘a change in mood’ .... A CHANGE IN MOOD. At times these days we surely need opportunities for changing our moods. ‘It’s easy’ that editor had said, ‘to get caught up in the play-by-play of things, especially in politics, so we try to remind ourselves to bring other parts of (who we are) into play.’ (Susan Lehmann, NY Times, March 6, 2017, p2)

How true! Especially these days when regardless of our political point of view, we feel bombarded with distressing, depressing, dyspepsia-producing news. What a gift it was — what a gift it is — to be reminded through such things as photos of blue footed boobies what are the gifts of smiles and laughter — and then to take further the changes in mood they offer: to sit, to be quiet, to play — to engage in deep play — the subject of this reflection — that we may engage in the work of *tikkun olum* — the work of healing the world.

We humans learn who we are and who we want to be by playing with each other: by romping, tickling, and tumbling, by chasing each other about and by playing all sorts of games, physical and mental. We play king of the mountain, hide and seek, dress-up, cowboys and Indians, office, doctor, cops and robbers, school, monopoly and chess. We learn the money game and play the market, we play politics; we play the advertising game; we play games of love and games of war. Kids, young and old, play video games, caring for virtual pets, building cities and civilizations, then destroying them — and every alien they meet.

Diane Ackerman, the poet-naturalist, perhaps known best for her book *A Natural History of the Senses*, asserts that at the very core of culture is play. Whether bears, cats, dogs, humans (or blue-footed boobies), we learn to interact with each other through play. Ackerman observes as well that all play (regardless of age or species engaged) has rules, rituals, and boundaries of time and place. Above all, she notes, play requires a freedom of spirit and imagination.

Deep play takes us beyond mere play to sacred ground; there is holiness in deep play in the sense that when we engage in it, we feel a sense of connection to something beyond ourselves. Grounded in a sense of wonder and awe deep play is accentuated by moments of transcendence. (I wonder if there may be some of that feeling on Sundays at your activity table.)

Deep play is characterized by rapture: enrapt, we may be carried away by an activity or idea in which we become engaged. We may become totally focused on a bird, a flower or tree, in a sport, or an idea. We forget for a time the world around us and we may lose track of time. My friend Shirley sews. Her sewing (with the sophistication of a couturier), she says, “allows her to express her creativity, gives her pleasure, is mentally challenging,... is centering... keeps her

focused...enrapt. Shirley says her sewing ‘keeps her alive,’ as she worries about the health and wellbeing of her husband who has not been well.

We forget for a time the world around us and we may lose track of time. My friend Sue told me about walking with her niece one afternoon in an area called The Prairie near Gainesville, Florida. They stopped in a protected space, expecting to be there “for just a few minutes,” when a herd of wild mustangs for which the prairie is known appeared. The horses played as Sue and her niece watched, transfixed. Sue described the sense of awe she felt at being so close, so intimate with, those wild horses. She and her niece were most surprised, she said, when they got back to the car and learned they had been watching those horses for five hours. Diane Ackerman calls that sense of lost time, of time out of time, “shudders of time.”

Deep play may be accentuated by moments of transcendence, moments of quiet. When she was three, my husband Larry’s granddaughter, Jovan, walked with her father and grandfather up the road that bisects Larry’s farm to a nearby beaver pond. In the twilight, in that pulsing primeval world defined by singing peepers and percussive twangs of bullfrogs, and as they watched for the beavers to come to the surface, Leland (her father) held Jovan in his arms and began to explain to her about what the beavers would soon be doing, the work of building their huts and dams. After Leland had spoken at some length, Jovan lifted her hand, placed it gently on her father’s cheek, and said “Please, Daddy, be quiet.”

Jovan understood at her core that even when surrounded by the deafening sounds of an amphibian chorus, we need a kind of soulful quiet for deep play, for that connection with the universe and with our deeper selves. Or, in deep play, enrapt and impassioned, she understood that we come -- on our own -- to the quiet in which we may discover something new about the world, about ourselves. For some, it could be a poem formed, or a painting envisioned or unfolding...a pilgrimage to a faraway holy place or an adventure: climbing a mountain, standing beneath a starlit sky.

Jovan represents the children among and within — and the lessons we may learn from our children.

Last summer, I was with my niece, Leslie, and her twin boys, then age 8. One afternoon I looked out and there was Payden, sitting on the patio, looking out over the valley below, sketching the mountain range in the distance. A few days later, I was awakened at 6 am, to the sounds of a violin. That was Cooper sitting on the patio welcoming the day. In both instances mine were vicarious experiences of their deep play.

Long ago in conversation with my son, Justin, who plays and teaches serious tennis, I was reminded of aspects of deep play in sports. He was talking about the necessity of the drills. They’re for the left brain so the body learns what it needs to do. Then there is the actual play with an internal switch to the right brain when one goes on automatic; people and sounds disappear and the play – deep play – “just happens.” Ackerman writes, “Deep play arises in moments of intense enjoyment, focus, control, creativity, timelessness confidence... lack of self-awareness, while doing things intrinsically worthwhile, rewarding for their own sake.” (118)

For my husband, Larry, inspired by awe and a sense of wonder, deep play is found in following a scientific quest. As a chemical physicist, he is touched deeply by some words from the poet William Blake. The poem, the writing of which was surely itself an act of deep play, was written in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, and was prophetic in its intuition:

TO SEE THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND,  
AND HEAVEN IN A WILD FLOWER,

HOLD INFINITY IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND,  
AND ETERNITY IN AN HOUR.

If we can understand the chemical composition of sand, or the DNA of a wildflower, we can indeed begin to understand the composition of the universe and of all life. Exceedingly deep play.

Through music, art, and scientific exploration, through poetry and literature and in nature, we may be lead into deep play. For me, these days, when I can become exceedingly agitated at hearing the daily news — or feel like curling up and sucking my thumb — the list of possibilities and the necessity for — engaging in deep play grows. And so, I lose myself in long walks, in music or stitching needlepoint, in jigsaw puzzles, sudoku, crossword puzzles and more. A friend is making a thousand origami cranes.

I chose this topic for today because summer (as Sara said at the beginning of this service) often offers opportunities for deep play. Perhaps this perception is a remnant of the rhythms of school days past. Perhaps there really is more time for us to engage in play -- and deep play – as we spend less time physically and emotionally working to keep warm. Perhaps these sweet June days and the longer hours of sunlight make it possible for us to sit longer and quieter – or to play longer and harder and deeper.

For whatever reason, I wish you times of deep play this summer. May you experience great shudders out of time as you discover each new bloom in a rainbow of day lilies... as you discover new corners of favorite woods or new places by favorite streams... as you rediscover a long-ago tucked-away talent ... as you fall in love again and again with this world... perhaps to create a poem, a painting, a clay figurine or an origami crane. I wish you gifts of deep play — gifts of soulful sustenance and healing — as you become one with the wind on your bicycle ... or one with the water of a quiet mountain lake or with the ceaseless flow of the ocean's waves. ... as you sit on your porches in twilight, at sunrise or sunset. I wish you deep play as you engage in the simplest, most everyday tasks that you may in turn be prepared to do the important work of healing this hurting world.

May your summers be blessed with the gifts of memory and story... with hours of deep, spirit-filled play.