

**Deep Play**  
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Summer is here, and for many of us that means vacation. After a hard year of work, it's time for a bit of play. You know – all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy (and Jill a dull girl). Not only that, the responsibilities of jobs or school sometimes have a way of wearing us down. The stresses and strains of everyday life leave us burned out and in need of renewal and regeneration. For some that may mean just vegging out, relaxing, catching up on missed sleep and rest. But for others of us, we want action. We want to get out and play, to exert ourselves in joyful ways, to revel in life. After all, what's the point of life if we can't have some pure enjoyment along the way?

So play time serves an important purpose in breaking up a life too filled with serious responsibilities. But play has a broader usefulness in life than simply providing a break from more serious pursuits. For instance, play serves as a source of learning, and practice for life, especially for the young. And not just for humans. How many of you have had a kitten? When we've taken in a stray kitten, I remember sitting and watching with utter fascination as it darted about, chasing a toy mouse, a soda bottle cap, or its own tail. Such playful activity is apparently built into the kitten's genetic code as a means of developing the skills it might need later on to hunt for its own food. In many species, adults frolic and grapple with their young in preparation for a time when they may have to fight for their survival. Watching animals play this way, it's easy to anthropomorphize about how much fun they're having. And they may well be. But their play also serves the purpose of preparing them for the serious pursuits of real life in a difficult world.

Modern thinking about early childhood education places great importance on play for our young children. Educators say that, in the preschool years especially, play is more important than academic drilling. Through play, children learn how to interact with each other and with the world around them. They learn about the capabilities and the limitations of their bodies. They learn to cope with novel situations they encounter in their unstructured play activities.

Furthermore, as with other animals, children's play prepares them for many aspects of adult life. Through games, they learn about winning and losing, cooperation, and teamwork. By playing house, or playing fire-fighter, or cops and robbers, or with cars and trucks, they're trying on some of the roles they might take on for real at some time in their future. Parents are often either delighted or horrified to see their own ways mirrored in their children's play, such as when a child comforts or scolds a doll or stuffed animal. Of course times change, and I now sometimes wonder what kind of future my children are preparing for in the time they spend playing computer and video games. I'm not encouraged by the fact that such games are already used by the military to help develop eye-hand coordination in potential fighter pilots.

In any case, play, at its best, helps prepare us for real life when we're young, and play helps us escape from real life when we're adults. I must admit that I'm a little uncomfortable with that kind of compartmentalization. The idea that fun is something we have to take time out for – to schedule – in the midst of the important, meaningful parts of life. Perhaps play deserves a more prominent place in life than something we do in the in-between times – if we can squeeze it in. Of course there are whole categories of people whose careers involve playing. Professional athletes, for instance. But are they really playing? Maybe some are, but I don't sense a really playful attitude in most pro athletes. Their job takes the form of a game, but it is

also a business, and many approach it with the same serious attitude they would any other business.

Those observations suggest to me that play has more to do with a state of mind than with the outward nature of our actions. An interview I heard on NPR a few years ago reinforced that idea. The radio guest was Diane Ackerman, author of a book called *Deep Play*. In this book she explores what she describes as a deeper form of play, which she associates with feelings of rapture and ecstasy. Deep play also encompasses transcendence, risk, obsession, pleasure, distractedness, timelessness, and a sense of the holy or sacred. We're not talking about tiddly-winks here. Deep play involves deep inner experience.

Similar ideas have appeared under different labels. Psychologist Abraham Maslow's 'peak experience', for example, shares with deep play the notions of transcendence and timelessness. Another shared feature is the intrinsic value of the experience. The reason Ackerman uses the term "play" is that she's talking about activities enjoyed for their own sake. They may have some value that goes beyond the immediate experience, but they, by definition, involve an immediate experience of joyfulness or ecstasy or rapture.

Another formulation of a very similar idea is that found in the reading I shared earlier. The terms used there were 'flow' or 'optimal experience'. It was there that we encountered some specific examples of those experiences: the sailor at one with her boat and the sea, the painter caught up in the act of creation, the father in a moment of connection with his child.

I've suggested that deep play is essentially an inner experience, not tied to particular external circumstances. While that's true, it's an oversimplification. In fact there are some activities that are more prone to the sense of deep play than others. Ackerman mentions, in particular, music and art, risk-taking, some sports, and religion. Yes, religion. In fact, she asserts that deep play always involves the sacred and holy. And she points to the playful quality of many religious rites and festivals. However, repeating prayers or singing hymns that have grown stale are not conducive to deep play. Deep play, or being in the flow, requires a focused engagement with what's going on around us.

Philosopher and theologian Henry Nelson Wieman, who became a Unitarian Universalist in his later years, had this to say about religion and play:

Religion, in one sense, is like baseball or any other form of play or art. The professionals who play in the big leagues render a great service to baseball. Baseball would certainly not pervade our national life as it does if it were not for these big leagues. But if you want to find out the true spirit of baseball in all the glory of a passion, you must go to the backyard, the sandlot, the side street, and the school ground. There it is not a profession, it is a passion. When a passion becomes a profession, it often ceases to be a passion. That is as true of religion as it is of baseball. Among the professionals you find a superb mastery and a great technique, but not too frequently the pure devotion. Perhaps in baseball the passion is not too important, but in religion it is all important. A religion that is not passionate simply is not worth considering. Therefore, I say we need more sandlot religion. The professional, whether White Sox or Methodist, controls inordinately our baseball and our religion.

Stop and think for a moment about those times when you have felt most alive, most in harmony with the universe, most like a full participant in the adventure of life – most passionate . . . Did those moments just happen, or did you facilitate the experience by engaging the world, or at least some part of it?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the ‘flow’ man, thinks of the quality of experience as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills. That is, we each are equipped with a set of skills, and we continually confront or avoid life challenges related to those skills. Now, if we have high levels of skill, but we aren’t challenged, the result is boredom. Think of a really bright child stuck in a classroom drilling on material already mastered. On the other hand, if we face strong challenges without the skills to manage well, the result can be anxiety or frustration. Think of being put on the spot with a task for which you are ill-equipped.

Csikszentmihalyi writes:

When goals are clear, feedback relevant, and challenges and skills are in balance, attention becomes ordered and fully invested. Because of the total demand on psychic energy, a person in flow is completely focused. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings. Self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. The sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes. When a person’s entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind, whatever one does becomes worth doing for its own sake; living becomes its own justification. In the harmonious focusing of physical and psychic energy, life finally comes into its own.

There’s that idea again of an activity’s intrinsic value. Worth doing for its own sake. Containing its own justification. Does that mean that the most worthwhile, value-filled life would be spent on a continual quest for peak experiences, for moments of deep play, for a permanent home in the flow? I don’t think so. There are those who seem to take that approach: some mountain climbers, body builders, chess players, extreme marathoners. Probably just about any pursuit you could name, someone has taken it to an extreme.

But I think those people are missing something. Yes, those transcendent moments are as great as anything one can experience. But when they’re over, what sustenance do they provide? Some nice memories, a vague longing to repeat the experience. It’s almost like and addiction to drugs. There’s the continuous drive to get that next rush. But there’s no larger context or framework to give any deeper meaning to the experience. Another example that comes to mind is sexuality. Is our sexuality merely a vehicle for collecting cheap thrills, or do we use it as a means of building deeper, stronger bonds of love with our closest loved ones? Play of all kinds can be a means to something greater, not simply an end in itself. To forget that is to short-change ourselves.

Yes, play can give us a much-needed break from the everyday world. But I hope I have expanded your concept of play a bit. When I speak of a deeper form of play, I’m talking about an approach to life that involves active engagement with the world around us, as opposed to a passive acceptance of whatever comes along. I’m talking about functioning at peak capacity. And I’m talking about being prepared to face unexpected challenges and responding creatively. That kind of deep play can give us access to deeper levels of this everyday world. A deep, and

playful, engagement with the everyday reality around us has the potential to carry us into the realm of transcendence, of creativity, of an enriched experience of life.

So I call on you to play with your family; play with your friends; play with ideas; play with possibilities. But engage in play not simply for its own sake, but for the possibility of deepening your experience of a rich and meaningful life, always being open to the chance of creating or experiencing something new and wonderful.

So may it be.