

## It's Time To Get Serious About Play and Spontaneity

Reading: Sayings of the Jewish Buddhist

Be here now.  
Be someplace else later.  
Is that so complicated?

Drink tea and nourish life;  
with the first sip, joy;  
with the second sip, satisfaction;  
with the third sip, peace;  
with the fourth, a Danish.

Wherever you go, there you are.  
Your luggage is another story.

Accept misfortune as a blessing.  
Do not wish for perfect health,  
or a life without problems.  
What would you talk about?

There is no escaping karma.  
In a previous life,  
you never called,  
you never wrote,  
you never visited.  
And whose fault was that?

Zen is not easy.  
It takes effort  
to attain nothingness.  
And then what do you have?  
Bupkis.

Breathe in.  
Breathe out.  
Breathe in.  
Breathe out.  
Forget this  
and attaining Enlightenment  
will be the least of your problems

Sermon:

A child entreats a nearby adult: “Come play with me. It will be fun. I’m serious,” as if fun can be captured. Yes, to play, to engage in activity with no practical purpose, can be fun, but fun needs a little magic. Fun is a little miracle, a fleeting moment that when captured, escapes.

Nevertheless in recent decades people have come to assume fun was there for the taking, and that we deserve fun, and that everything is supposed to be fun. This attitude may be different from that of the previous WWII generation, who made enormous sacrifices to create abundance for their children. Those children now take that abundance as something to which they are entitled, and fun is part of that entitlement.

So the assumption is: we should be having fun. Madison Avenue helps. It tells us driving is fun. Family outings, fun. School, fun. Work, exercise, all fun. Commercials show people having swell times at these activities, suggesting that if one is not having fun doing them, there is something wrong. If a kid traipsing through Disney World looks up at his parents and says, “This ain’t no fun, ma,” his ma’s heart sinks. My wife and I, while strolling among families and RV’s in Yosemite Valley, overheard a mother scold her son with: “You’re going to start the day over with a smile on your face.” We rolled our eyes. Later we would use that line on each other.

The expectation that so much is supposed to be fun puts some pressure on fundom. Put a smile on your face! That pressure makes fun disappear. “We’ll have fun. I’m serious.” I don’t know.

Pressure to have fun, pressure of any kind, makes it harder to be one’s self. Pressure says, “Be who I think you should be. Do what I think you should do.” I want to be myself, do what I want to do, so pressure is a threat to myself, which makes matters serious.

Playfulness and seriousness have a neuropsychological component. Let’s say there is a continuum of human mental functioning, with at one end: thought, the other end: reflex. On the thought side things are slow. On the reflex side: fast. You know reflex. If you touch a hot stove or have to slam on the brakes, you want fast. It saves your life. On the slow, thought side, people have time to be flexible and creative, which allows for many solutions to a problem. On the reflex side, no time, only two solutions to a problem: fight or flight. What pushes us to the reflex side is a threat. We go to the thought side with safety. So if a bear ambled into the sanctuary right now, we would all go to the threat, reflex side, and find ourselves in fight or flight. I’d vote flight.

To gear up to fight or run, the body sends blood and oxygen to the large muscles, needed for fighting and running. As it does, less goes to maintenance organs, which are not needed in an emergency, such as the stomach, and the brain. So under threat people experience a knot in the stomach, and have trouble thinking.

The part of the brain that is working is the reptile brain. Our brains contain evolutionary stages: reptile brain, mammal brain, human cerebral cortex. In an emergency, the reptile brain kicks in, and reptiles are serious. You don't see snakes running and skipping in the meadow. Of course, you're thinking, snakes don't have legs. Well, you don't see iguanas, crocodiles, and monitor lizards running and skipping in the meadow. But on the thought side the mammal brain operates, and mammals play. So when people feel safe, the mammal brain operates, and people play. When people feel threatened and preparing for fight or flight, the reptile brain is operating, and things are serious. And although pressure to have fun is less threatening than a bear wandering into the room, that pressure still takes away the safety on which fun delicately thrives.

Play then comes with safety and an environment in which you, everyone, can be themselves. You might remember times when you have played. I can think of a dinner party with people I like, and who like me, and everyone belongs, and everyone can be themselves, and it feels good and safe, and we're laughing.

Walt Whitman describes moments of such freedom and ease:

“The Yankee clipper is under her sky-sails, she cuts the sparkle and scud,  
My eyes settle the land, I bend at her prow or shout joyously from the deck.

The boatmen and clam-diggers arose early and stopt for me,  
I tuck'd my trowser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time;  
You should have been with us that day round the chowder-kettle.”

Or joking with my wife. The day is done; our daughter, May, in bed. Now we can relax, and play. Although I am always the sober and cerebral person you all see, I sometimes try to tie my shoes with mittens on my hands and other such experiments, and she describes me with the term: dope-o-rama. I tell her I am a doctor and have a Ph.D. She tells me I have a Ph.D. in dope-ology.

Marilynne Robinson describes another such a moment in her novel, Gilead. The narrator speaks as if to his small son whom he is watching play catch with a visiting young man:

“Young Boughton (the young man) was watching you scoop up grounders, probably to cover for the fact that you weren't likely to catch anything on the fly. You were being very earnest about it all, running hither and thither on those clever child legs of yours, and he was saying, ‘Come on, come on,’ and pounding his glove, and then, in a sportscaster's voice, ‘He's rounding second, folks. Will the throw be in time?’ And you would lose the ball again, and he would say, ‘This is amazing, folks. The runner appears to have tripped on his shoelace! He's down! He's taking a while to catch his breath! Now he's up, he's headed for the plate!’ He would say, ‘He's dragging his left leg, folks, he's hopping on one foot!’ And by then you were giggling considerably, but you got the ball to him finally, and he said, ‘Well, folks, that runner's out!’ It was beautiful to watch you two in the flickering shade.”

By accepting and making light of the boy's fumbling, Boughton makes it safe, and then fun.

I have observed this congregation be accepting, and safe, and fun. During the months I have been filling in for Nathan, you have faced challenges, and, when serious purpose is called for, you have been impressive. And I have also seen an acceptance of each other, that gives your community a safety that allows for playfulness when play has been called for. I hope you all feel the acceptance I have observed, and feel safe, and can enjoy some playfulness here.

Novelty contributes to play and fun. For my 3-year-old daughter much of life is new. She sometimes remarks, "Never done that before." She often wakes up in the morning singing. I am 54 years old. I have woken up almost 20,000 mornings. Been there, done that, I don't wake up singing. Novelty and stimulation tickle the brain. Combine novelty, stimulation, and safety, and people play.

And with play comes learning. Back to our continuum of mental functioning, in the safety and thought side, the brain forms new neural pathways, with which people learn. In the reflex, fight or flight experience, the brain is not only starved for the resources it needs to think, but diminished in its ability to form new neural pathways, and so people do not learn. To teach someone a lesson, by threatening them, sounds big and bluff, but actually does not impart learning, except to learn to be intimidated.

But with safety, novelty, and play, we learn. Working with you was new for me: a new community, new people to know, new situations to consider, new sermons to write. I am grateful for an opportunity to learn and play in this community. I hope you also find something novel here and opportunities to learn.

And liminality contributes to play and fun. Liminality comes from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning "a threshold." Crossing a threshold, leaving the familiar four walls and roof, moving from the familiar into the unknown, one experiences this liminality. The liminal state involves unknowns, ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy.

In the liminal state all bets are off, including one's identity. The novel, Moby Dick, begins with the line, "Call me Ishmael." Probably his parents did not hold their infant child in their arms and name him "Ishmael." But the speaker has taken a new identity to carry him through the liminal sea voyage.

People do that on backpacking trips. Through-hikers on the Appalachian Trail adopt trail names. One August hiking the Appalachian Trail in New Hampshire, I met hikers who had walked all the way from Georgia; a teenager called, Nomad, a 50-year old man who by then had distilled down a major belly, called himself, Flatliner, and a married couple, the Owl and the Pussycat. Hiking from Georgia to Maine involves a long liminal state of openness and unknowns: what is over that ridge? What will I see around the next bend? And so old homebound identities are left behind.

Similarly I joined the youth group of the San Jose Unitarian Church for a hike in the Sierras. The minister invited me. I was going to be in the Sierras anyway, so I went along. One of the kids was named Ben, but I originally misheard his name as Dan, and I began calling him Dan. Even when I learned his real name, he did not mind me calling him Dan,. So I kept using the trail name: Dan. In the morning as we would get underway, I'd say, "Book-it, Dan-O," and he would wear a quiet smile and lead the group down the path.

Then with liminality, something mysteriously fun occurs. The journey, the unknowns, do not offer all that much safety, but the view can be extraordinary out on a limb. One seems open to, and touch the energies that roil the sea and enliven the animals, that cause trees to flower, and stars to shine. In this vital world, something in the spirit comes out to play.

Maybe also the journey, the liminal, involves a trust in the spirit, and that trusting a spirit underlying all, creates, at an ultimate level, a safe place for play. Maybe the journey involves a vision of something, a promise, a discovery. What will we learn on this voyage of the Pequod? What will I find on the way to Mt. Katahdin? With that promise, people come to life and play.

The writer, Suzanne Jordan, recalls this kind of liminal moment:

"I remember one day, long ago...Pam Davis and I walked to the College Village drug store one Saturday morning to buy some candy. We were about 12 years old (fun ages). She got her Bit-O-Honey. I got my malted milk balls, chocolate stars, Chunkys, and a small bag of M&M's. We started back to her house. We had a whole day to look forward to. We had plenty of candy. It was a long way to Pam's house, but every time we got weary Pam would put her hand over her eyes, scan the horizon like a sailer, and say, 'Oughta reach home by nightfall,' at which point the two of us would laugh until we thought we couldn't stand it another minute. Then after we got calm, she'd say it again."

The liminality of the day turns 12-year-old Pam into an old salt. The trust in something, in the friendship, and in the glory of the day unfolding before them, allows for play, and it is fun.

A community on a collaborative spiritual journey can share in this liminality. You can risk a little on this exploration of unknowns, but in that risk can come delight and the view from out on a limb. And the spirit rallies and maybe a little playfulness follows. Maybe a trust in some spiritual hands that hold you, gives you a sense of safety, and a little playfulness follows. Maybe the vision of ultimate wonders of peace, wholeness, and liberation, give hope and with such hope, playfulness follows. And so "Book-it, Dan-O, and Howard, Tinkie, and Laura, Jeff, and Maureen, and choir, and all you Sherborn UU's," "Oughta reach home by nightfall."

-- The Rev. Kenneth Reeves