

Win, Lose or Draw©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman October 21, 2018

Those of you who are familiar with Shell Silverstein are aware that he has a certain way with words. He has a way of putting words together which requires us to perceive the world a bit differently than we may have previously. The poem Kathryn just shared with us is a good example. The title, “Hug O’ War,” grabs our attention. Clearly this is an oxymoron. As such, it challenges our rational minds to make sense of what is being stated. Our experiences and perceptions make it very difficult to comprehend how hug and war can be paired in such a way.

The first two lines of the poem provide a context that begins to allow the word pairing to be understood. Hug o’ war is a peaceful alternative to tug o’ war. Those same two lines however, present us yet again with two very different and opposing perspectives. This time the opposing perspectives focus on play. All of us are familiar with the game tug o’ war. Many of us may have played the game as children. We may have played the game with our friends or classmates or possibly we played it with a pet. As a young child tug o’ war was one of the games I frequently played with our family’s dog. As I think about it now, it is quite possible that it was her favorite game to play with me because she almost always won. Typically, as my hands would tire, I would lose my hold on whatever we were tugging on and she would run off with it, proud of her accomplishment. But the game of hug o’ war that Silverstein goes on to describe isn’t a win/lose situation. Here is a game where everyone who wants to participate can play, and there are no losers. In a certain sense what he is describing is a game where the intended outcome is a draw. If everyone wins then the game ends in a tie, one that everyone is not just content but even happy with.

The game hug o’ war, or any game where the outcome is a tie, is unusual in our culture today. Today when the word play is mentioned it is typically in reference to organized sports. Sports such as baseball, tennis, soccer, basketball or the mega-sport, football. There was a time in some of these sports when it was possible for a game to end in a draw, a tie. But the rules have been changed and few sports today allow for such a possibility. It seems in our culture today that having a definite winner and loser has become the most important aspect of the game. That wasn’t always the case.

Many of you may have heard the expression, “it isn’t whether you win or lose, it is how you play the game.” That saying is an adaptation of the last lines of a poem by Henry Grantland Rice, an early 20th Century sports writer. Here are his original lines; “When the One Great Scorer comes to mark against your name, He writes not that you won or lost, but how you played the game!” As I think about much of what is in the news these days, it seems what he wrote is no longer the prevailing perspective. Instead, what he wrote has been completely flipped around. And that new perspective isn’t just in sports. It is present and dominant in business, in politics, in international relations and in many areas of this country’s culture as well. That perspective is, “it isn’t how you play the game, it is whether you win or lose.” I don’t know about you, but this intensifying focus on winning by any means possible concerns me greatly. It concerns me because when winning becomes the ultimate goal, the things that ought to matter most in life become collateral damage. And what ought to matter most in life? The list is long so I

will only mention a few things that come to mind. When winning becomes the ultimate goal we diminish or even dismiss many of our other values. We disregard morals. We trample on trust. We lock justice in a dungeon to keep it from the light of day. And the phrase “fair play” becomes an oxymoron. I am sure many of you can think of an array of other things that belong on the list of what gets lost when winning becomes paramount. I think most of us recognize that an excessive focus on winning brings out the worst in our nature.

For me, and I am sure for you as well, there is so much more to life than winning. As young children we all instinctively knew that. I want to take a moment to have us remember our experience of play as a child. As young infants winning held no significance whatsoever in our play. By the time we reached early grade school many of us likely played for hours with friends, classmates or pets, and the play involved no scorekeeping at all. And at the end of our play everyone came away feeling good about the play and each other.

Years ago a former social work colleague shared something with me about this kind of play that gave me a new level of understanding about how important it is to all of us. She told me that “play is the work children do that prepares them for the future.” In other words, play, and by that I am talking about unstructured, free-form play, is how children learn values and skills. Such play provides unlimited opportunities for a child to actively engage in living into our Second Principle, which calls us to “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” Other values, such as respect, honesty, and fairness are learned as well. And play is how children develop the mental and physical skills they will need to put their values into action while facing the challenges of life as they grow up. At some point in childhood our play began to include the possibility of winning and losing. Winning and losing are two possible outcomes in certain situations in life. So it is necessary that we learn about winning and losing. But more importantly, hopefully at a relatively early age, we learn about putting winning and losing in perspective.

Yet as I think about the current state of our country, I believe we are failing our children in this very area today. A recent comic strip in last Sunday’s Bozeman Chronicle seemed to leap off the page at me in this regard. The comic strip I am referring to is Baby Blues, possibly some of you are familiar with it. It focuses on the life of the MacPherson family, consisting of a mother and father and their three young children. In this particular comic, the oldest daughter, Zoe, approaches her father while he is watching a football game on tv. Zoe is in grade school and has a doll in her hand. She looks up at her father and says, “Watching football, huh?” To which her father articulately replies, “Yup.” Zoe responds, “That’s nice.” In the next two frames she proceeds to speak to what is important to her. “Of course, it would also be nice to spend some quality time with your daughter. Time is really sailing by. These precious years will be gone before you know it.” The final frame shows mother having entered the room with Zoe and her father kneeling together on the carpet with dolls strewn out in front of them. But the image doesn’t tell the full story. Zoe, who is turned to face her mother says, “We’re doing instant replay with dolls.” And dad, who is focused on the tv says, “Then Malibu Barbie© went in motion...”

This cartoon depicts what I believe is one of the many causes of our culture’s current focus on winning. As a culture, organized sports have become so important to so many people that our perspectives about life and our beliefs about what matters in

life have slowly but significantly changed. As a culture, we have come to accept, and even expect, that in many aspects of life what matters most is who wins and who loses. And what is even more tragic as far as I am concerned is that parents are introducing their children to this perspective at earlier and earlier ages. Parents are getting their children in organized sports with all of the best intentions. And let me say here that there are very good and beneficial reasons for children, and for that matter for any of us, to engage in organized sports. What we haven't done is consider the downside of such involvement. When children aren't allowed sufficient time to engage in unstructured, free play, as opposed to organized sports, they miss out on learning important developmentally appropriate perspectives, skills, and attributes. In organized sports a child's physical and mental abilities may improve significantly. And they may learn how to be part of a team. But when they don't have sufficient time for or experience in unstructured, free play, their creativity, their spontaneity and their ability to look beyond winning or losing may be hindered.

I want to be clear, my intention in speaking on the negative impacts of organized sports is not to assign blame or to elicit a feeling of guilt. Instead, my intention is to have us begin to consider that we, and/or those we love, may have unknowingly been slowly and methodically conditioned to view the world through the lens of winning or losing. And the more our culture has become enamored by and engaged in or with organized sports, the more important winning has become as a value, not just in sports but in many areas of life.

I know that the picture I am painting here is not a pretty one. It may even be ugly and difficult to look at. And I realize that what I have been saying is challenging a sacred cow of our culture. Clearly many of us are concerned about what is happening in our country. As individuals, our ability to change the course our country is on is limited. We have the power, however, to do something that challenges the dominant perspectives that are both damaging and dangerous. We can challenge the dominant perspective of winning and losing by reducing our exposure to organized sports and engaging again in play—unstructured, free play. As I say that I think of a slogan printed on a tee shirt I was given many years ago. "If we are going to live together, we need to play together." For me this saying isn't about playing sports, it is about playing the way young children play, with creativity, spontaneity, and with an instinctive awareness of fairness. Any of us, no matter our age, can engage in such play if we commit ourselves to learning again how to do so. If you have questions about the kind of play I am talking about please come talk to me and I will share more with you.

In closing I would like to have us all hear Silverstein's poem, "Hug O' War," once again.

I will not play at tug o' war.
I'd rather play at hug o' war,
Where everyone hugs
Instead of tugs,
Where everyone giggles
And rolls on the rug,
Where everyone kisses,
And everyone grins,

And everyone cuddles,
And everyone wins.

So may it be.