

“Let’s Play”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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I don’t know about you, but I don’t play as much as I would like to. And I definitely don’t play anywhere near as much as I did when I was a child or even a young adult. I have always liked to play and still do. I know lots of games—games that can be played by 2 people all the way up to hundreds of people. Some of you may recall that in the first two years of my ministry here at UUFB I organized an evening of play. That evening children as young as 5 and adults as old as 85 were playing games and laughing together for more than an hour. I know the benefits of play, some of which were mentioned in our reading this morning. I even have a t-shirt from a well-known athletic shoes company that says “If we’re going to live together, we need to play together.” Yet in spite of the fact that I like to play, I know many of the benefits of play, and I have a special t-shirt to play in, I just don’t make time to play as much as I would want to. I would say that I have a play deficit in my life. I am going to guess that some of you may feel you have a play deficit as well. If my guess is correct, I wonder what we might do to alleviate the play deficit we are experiencing. I invite you to think about ways you, or we, might increase the amount of play in our lives.

It might be beneficial at this point to consider a few of the reasons that some of us are experiencing a play deficit. The reason that seems most obvious to me is that for the past 15 months a deadly pandemic has run roughshod through our community and around the world. The pandemic dramatically restricted our movement and our connection with others. Play becomes restricted when we are unable to actively engage with playmates. While solitary play is beneficial, playing alone just doesn’t provide the level of options or the possibilities that group play does. The pandemic offers one explanation for the play deficit I mentioned. While the pandemic has had a significant impact on all of our lives, and on our ability to play with others, it isn’t the sole reason that a play deficit exists. There are multiple other reasons why I and some of you don’t play as much as we might want to or as much as would be beneficial for us.

The first two sentences of our reading this morning give other explanations for why we may not play enough. Each of these sentences deserves to be heard again. And each deserves further exploration. Here is the first sentence. “In our hectic, modern lives, many of us focus so heavily on work and family commitments that we never seem to have time for pure fun.” Modern life, as this sentence asserts, is definitely hectic. The demands of work can be intense, even if that work doesn’t lead to getting a paycheck. I know that many of you, including those of you who are retired, volunteer your time and energy to causes, issues and organizations that are important to you. This Fellowship is one of the organizations to which many of you volunteer time and energy. While I can’t authorize a paycheck for all of you who volunteer, I want to say thank you. Your efforts are greatly appreciated. And family commitments, even when they are fulfilling and enjoyable, are rightfully a high priority in our lives. But those family commitments often don’t involve playing together.

The second sentence of the reading speaks to a truth I noticed many, many years ago. “Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we stopped playing.” This sentence is not completely accurate as it is written. Few, if any of us totally stopped playing. And yet this sentence definitely holds some truth. I know that as I have aged I am playing far less than I did as a child, as a young adult, and even as a middle-aged adult. As we age we seem to place less importance or value on play. While we may value and set aside “leisure time,” our leisure time might not have us actively participating in play. Our leisure time may include activities that are entertaining, such as watching movies, reading books, attending concerts or plays, or possibly watching sporting events. None of the entertainment activities I just mentioned however are the same as actively engaging in play. And while such leisure activities have their benefits, they don’t offer some of the important benefits that play does.

As we heard in our reading this morning engaging in play offers multiple benefits. Here is one quote from the reading that identifies several such benefits. “Playing with your romantic partner, friends, co-

workers, pets and children is a sure (and fun) way to fuel your imagination, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and emotional well-being.” The reading goes on to state that when you “play with the joyful abandon of childhood, you can reap oodles of health benefits throughout life.” In a different article also titled “The Benefits of Play for Adults,” Mark Sakraid writes the following.

Play is the gateway to vitality according to the National Institute for Play (NIFP). Play is uniquely “rewarding, it generates optimism, seeks out novelty, makes perseverance fun, leads to mastery, gives the immune system a bounce and fosters empathy.” Play is also powerful in creating a sense of community.

I think all of us could agree that reaping the individual benefits these two articles mention—benefits such as more creativity, emotional well-being, optimism, and empathy— would add to our enjoyment and quality of life. The final sentence of the quote I just shared speaks to an important benefit that play offers a group of people. “Play is also powerful in creating a sense of community.” I believe it will be important for us to attend to the strength of the communities we are a part of as the threat of the COVID pandemic lessens and we begin to engage in more in-person gatherings and activities. The pandemic has put significant stress and strain on each of us as individuals. It has also worn and frayed the threads that bind us together in community.

Before I address the benefits of play for communities, I think it is both appropriate and important for me to spend a bit more time talking about the pandemic and its impacts. All of us recognize what I stated earlier, the pandemic dramatically restricted our movement and our connection with others. What we may not recognize is that the pandemic has been a long-term traumatic experience for all of us. The trauma that each one of us has experienced is unique. For some of us the trauma has involved being isolated from others for what seemed like eternity. For others the trauma has been living with the constant fear of an unseen virus that possesses the potential to make us seriously ill or even kill us. Some among us contracted the virus and at least a few of you may still be suffering from what is referred to as “long haul COVID.” Still others have lost family or friends to the virus. These are just a few of the ways the pandemic has been traumatic for us. As we re-engage with people in community, the effects of the extended trauma we have lived through will begin to emerge. None of us can know at this point just how the trauma effects will show up. I will promise you though that they will show up. It is very likely that we won’t recognize the trauma effects when we first experience or see them. I know this because of my experience counseling trauma survivors in my prior career as a social worker. Many times I found myself initially surprised and confused when a person I was working with would exhibit behaviors that were triggered by a traumatic experience they went through months or years previously. I mention the issue of trauma because we will all experience the effects of the trauma, either within ourselves or in those around us, in the days ahead. I believe we would all be well served to be alert to—and to attend to—the effects of trauma that we will certainly encounter at some point.

So now I return to the power that play can have when it comes to building community. As I said, the threads of our communities, including our UUFB community, have been worn and frayed as a result of the pandemic. When I was a social worker and not yet thinking about going into ministry, I had the opportunity to see the power therapeutic play can have in assisting children and youth learn to face, cope with and heal from traumatic experiences. And in my experience of leading therapy groups I have seen the incredible healing benefits a person can get from being in a group of people they trust—a group of people they can share their vulnerabilities and struggles with. Play therapy and group therapy can be beneficial when they are needed, but they aren’t needed in many situations. Many times a person can gain a tremendous amount from simply playing with others, from being in a community of people where they feel safe, where they can take risks, and where they can come out of the experience feeling good about themselves and those they were engaging with. At this point, I want us to hear again a sentence from our reading. “Play and laughter perform an essential role in building strong, healthy relationships by bringing people closer together, creating a positive bond, and resolving conflict and disagreements.” If what this sentence asserts is true, then play and laughter are powerful medicine.

I would like to take what this sentence asserts one step further. It seems to me that what the author is referring to in using the word “conflict” is what I might call external conflict—in other words, conflict between individuals. But I would assert that the trauma of the pandemic has created internal conflicts for some or possibly all of us. And I believe that play and laughter can be very helpful when it comes to addressing some of the internal conflict caused by trauma that may be hiding within us.

By now it ought to be clear that I believe we would all benefit from making time to include more play in our lives. It would be beneficial for us as individuals, and it would be beneficial for the relationships and the communities we are a part of. I know I am looking forward to taking some much-needed time off in the coming weeks. During that time off I intend to engage in activities that I think of as play. As Katie shared during the announcements portion of our service, the Fellowship has a gathering at Bozeman Pond Park on Sunday, June 27. That would be a great opportunity for any of us who are so inclined to play together. In the weeks and months ahead, we might even want to consider forming some play groups and organize play times. Doing so would offer opportunities to increase the amount of fun in our lives and strengthen the bonds between us. As the t-shirt I mentioned previously states, if we are going to live together, we need to play together.

As I thought about how to end this sermon titled “Let’s Play” a poem kept coming to mind. The poem is by Shel Silverstein. I want to share that poem with you now. It is titled “Hug O’ War.”

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 roles on the rug,
Where everyone kisses,
And everyone grins,
And everyone cuddles,
And everyone wins.

So may it be.