

Practicing Playfulness

**“The Path that is best for you is the Path
that keeps the best of you in play.”**

-the Oaqui

Playfulness is what you might call a practice. It's something you need to remind your self to do until you don't.

There are many good reasons to let be playful, and many equally good reasons why you generally don't. Which explains why it's called “practice.”

So, here's what you might need to remember: 1) you can almost always choose to be playful, 2) you're almost always allowed to be playful, 3) and in all likelihood, you'll be glad, and so will the people with whom you are playing.

The easiest way to practice playfulness is, as you've probably already surmised, by playing. And, of the many things you might be playing so that you can practice playfulness, often the most instructively fun of those things are games.

Especially games that are obviously playful, games whose only purpose is to engage your playful self. Games that have nothing to do with score, or winning, or being on one side or another. Games that play with playfulness itself.

Games like these.

Holy days

My wife Rocky and I try to spend all day Saturday alone together. It's always been a holy kind of day for us. A day of rest and reflection. But as we've grown older together, and further away from organized religion, our Sabbath became a day for us to reflect on the holiness of our love for each other.

We have breakfast in bed together. We have one of those milk frothers, and we've learned how you can sprinkle cinnamon designs on the foam, so whoever's making breakfast usually makes some kind of playful, loving design. You know, hearts or initials or things that turn into hieroglyphics that we interpret together. After breakfast, we usually read together from one of her journals, making a present out of our past. Then maybe we just look out the window together, at the squirrels and leaves and birds and people passing, or just snuggle. And then it's almost time for lunch.

Sometimes we both take an afternoon nap, more often it's just me – so we both get some alone time (even though I spend mine sleeping.) Then we go on a neighborhood walk together and come home for a cup of tea and whatnot and a few games.

I love how we play together, playing for fun, not keeping score; scoring, if anything, how much we laugh or appreciate each other's brilliance or playfulness. We've been playing Banagrams^{iv} for a while now. Again, not keeping score. Just playing until we've used up all the tiles. Maybe giving each other tiles when desperation sets in. Lately, we've been playing side-by-side, seeing, after a while, how we can link our crosswords together. O, we're so symbolic.

Sometimes we play ping pong on the table our kids got us from one of their neighbors. As usual, we don't keep score, and most recently we play without a net; but with ping pong, especially when we share a really long volley, we often reach an almost magical togetherness. Sometimes we even play swing music from YouTube to accompany our game, and when one of us goes to retrieve the ball, we do a little dance together. Sometimes we just sit around, silently, enjoying the quiet that we create for each other.

And then our little dinner together, and then, after having a day turned so completely to each other, we return to the week.

Applauding leaves

Here's a story about a little game-like thing that can only be played during the fall:

One afternoon in the fall, decades ago, my wife and I had taken chairs up to the field to watch the leaves fall. It was one of those times in our lives – a bright, beautiful day, the kids happily occupied, clear, warm light, a cool breeze. And in that cool, bright breeze, leaves, scintillating with color, waving at us.

And as we were sitting, watching leaves dance and fall, we were so struck by the graceful, spiraling fall of one particular leaf, that we actually, spontaneously, simultaneously applauded it. And then, a little later, another leaf danced its way to the ground, with such unique and final poise that we applauded it, as well. Together. Each fall, a little death. Each dance, uniquely final.

A few minutes later, as the breeze strengthened, we were applauding again, again, and again, and our souls, I swear, were dancing together with the leaves, celebrating life and time and world. And we laughed. And thought about the kids. And carried our chairs back down to the house, still laughing.

Passing humanity

One of my favorite things to do when I go for a walk is to make passing contact with strangers. It's a fine art, requiring careful timing and sophisticated strategy.

A pass begins anywhere between 10 and 5 paces (the fewer the paces, the greater the challenge). During this time, you must establish eye contact and determine the form of encounter, verbal or non-. Each has its own range. Nonverbal can vary from smile to wave to hat-doffing (for the hatted few). Verbal can vary from "hi" to "hello" to "howya doin'" to "beautiful day" and beyond.

It can be a very rewarding game, especially when someone actually acknowledges and returns your greeting, the degree of reward depending on the form that response takes relative to your opening gambit. So, for example, a smile and a nod in response to your opening smile is significantly more rewarding than a nod or smile alone. A verbal response to your nonverbal opening is even more rewarding. Clearly the combinations are endless.

It can be an equally disheartening experience when your gambit of greeting is not returned.

To bridge the psychic abyss left by a Gambit Declined, I, from time to time, like to keep score. Every time I get a response, I give anywhere from 1 to 10 points to Humanity. In like manner, when I don't get a response, I chalk it up to Man's Inhumanity to Man. Since I am on the side of Humanity, I am always gladdened when Humanity wins. Consequently, I am constantly exploring new and more effective strategies to secure Humanity's ascendance in the Great Game. And, when the victory goes to the dark side, I, at least, am not personally implicated.

One of the things that makes this game so richly playworthy is all the variables. The allure of finding a winning strategy often keeps me smiling and waving even when Humanity is 10 or even 20 points behind.

It is in this spirit that I reveal one of my most exemplary and successful strategies:

First, you need to find someone with a baby. I do like babies, by the way, so the following is no mere ploy. The trick is to smile at the baby first. Not that you'd expect to get a smile back. Depending on how many paces you were apart when you initiate the smile, you might go so far as to include a mini, baby-appropriate wave. The second, and equally crucial part of the trick is to glance up from the baby in time so that the implied greeting is deflected upwards to the adult. I've become so skilled with this strategy that Humanity has earned as much as 8 points from a single passing encounter.

Toilet Paper Tug of War

In my earliest stages exploring what would become the Interplay Games Curriculum^v, before I discovered that children's street and playground games were going to be the key to the soul of my work, I focused solely on theater games. I had had some wonderful experiences teaching kids improvisational theater and had hoped to bring similar joy and creativity to my inner-city charges.

I managed to develop a few game-like exercises that proved fun enough for the kids to want to play again and again. One of which was Toilet Paper Tug of War.

The way I played it, I gave two kids a length of toilet paper (about a yard) and invited them to act as if they were playing tug of war with a real rope. To succeed at the improvisation, one of the kids had to lose, and the toilet paper had to remain intact.

It turned out to be surprisingly fun, though rarely successful. I'd say out of every 10 attempts, only one pair managed to get through the exercise without tearing the toilet paper. But the kids loved it and wanted to play it over and over. I don't know if it was because we were using toilet paper (a vaguely "naughty" prop) or because the task was so funny in the first place. But serious fun was most definitely had. And it was, to me, at least, a near-perfectly objective correlative for what the art of acting was all about: the delicate art of creating a believable relationship.

In my later years, I tried playing it with a rope made of socks, which also invited the exercise of high drama and modicum of interpersonal restraint, but, for me, at least, trying to play a believable game of tug of war with a yard of one-ply toilet paper remains in my memory as an apotheosis of educational theatrics.

I still play the toilet paper version today, primarily when I'm playing with couples. The game turns out to be a powerful simulation of the dynamics of most human relationships. No matter how much we want to move another person, the relationship can only withstand so much tension before it breaks. To engage another human being in genuine dialog, both participants need to remain aware that the relationship takes precedence over winning. In fact, winning itself is meaningless when the overriding goal must always be to keep the relationship intact.

Kvetch Kakophony

There's a very funny, often silly, and oddly healing movement called "Complaints Choirs." Wikipedia explains it as "a community art project that invites people to sing about their complaints in a choir together with fellow complainers."

The Kvetch Kakophony is similar in affect, but far less artful.

One person is the conductor. Everyone else stands in a choir-like array. When the conductor signals, everyone starts singing their complaints about whatever they feel like complaining about. At the beginning, they might start out singing to a particular tune, like Hava Nagila or Take Me Out to the Ballgame. After a while, they should be encouraged to change to any tune they feel like complaining to, regardless of what tune anyone else is using. The conductor can get as conductor-like as she so desires, getting the choir to sing more loudly or more quietly, appointing people to be soloists or to sing duets etc. Singers can choose to sing in whatever language compels them, or in complete gibberish. No rhymes or reason, either, are required. Kvetching noises are encouraged.

Dayeinu, the game

There are some patently playful games you can play that can prove as laugh-provoking as they are love-affirming. There's a game, for example, loosely based on the Passover song "Dayeinu," or "it would have been enough for us." It's often played as "It's Not So Bad," or "You think you have problems?" Or "It Could Have Been Better."

Dayeinu, it would have been enough for us. If our only blessing was to be in the same family, it would have been enough. If we weren't just in the same family, but also loved each other as much as we do, it would have been enough. If we were just in the same family and loved each other as much as we do and lived long enough to appreciate each other as adults, it would have been enough....

It's a loving competition, one that can be both fun and varied. For example, where the object is to think of something that, if you're playing the "it's not so bad" variation, isn't as bad as something else. You can start with anything that's not so bad: life, death, purpose, the pizza you just ate. "That pizza wasn't so bad," you say, for example. And then I might say "neither was the service." And you: "even the lighting wasn't so bad." And on and on until we can't think of anything else that wasn't so bad. And then we play "It Could Have Been Better." We could have also played "If Only" (in Yiddish "halevai"). If we had only seen each other and joked together and touched each other and not played It Would Have Been Enough together, it would have been enough.

It Would Have Been Enough is not just a game. It's the Jewish version of The Theory of Relativity.

And fun. Even in the hospice. So much fun that it couldn't have been more fun, even if we wanted to. Well, maybe a little more...

It Could Be Worse

There's a game called It Could Be Worse where each player has to think of something awful that "really" happened that was definitely more awful than anything that anyone else thought of.

For example, you say to your self: "I think I'm going to lose my job." Then, your self says to you: "It could be worse, you could have already lost your job." And then you respond to your self "It could be worse than that. I could have lost my self-esteem." To which your self responds "It could have even been worse than that, you could have discovered that you don't have any self that's esteem-worthy." Etc. Etc.

You can play it sitting in a circle, someone saying something that could be worse, someone else, anyone, whoever thinks of it, saying something that could be worse than that. And then someone else. And then someone still else. Worse and worse and worse. Until someone says "it could've been better."

Some say that this is a variation of the more classic game: You Think You've Got Problems?

It's a very funny game. It's funny how funny that game is. You'd think it would be depressing. But you'd be wrong.

Playing with rejection

Even rejection, which, at times, seems as worse as it can get, can be an invitation to practice playfulness, and to some very healing play, in deed.

Many, many years ago – before inkjet and laser printers, before even laptops and correcting-Selectric typewriters – that many years ago – when I was convinced that I was going to be a professional poet (professional poet, ah, the naive, uninformed ambitions of youth). I found my self the unwilling possessor of a growing collection of what professional poets of the time classified as “rejection slips.”

In a moment of pre-self-immolation, I found my self at my nearest wall with a roll of tape, decorously affixing my rejection collection into a visually pleasing display. I discovered what some describe as a “grim satisfaction” as my personal wailing wall assembled itself before me. In fact, I found my self sending my poetry to more and more prestigious publications, harboring a deeply hidden hope that one of my poems might actually find acceptance, whilst gathering some of the most prestigious rejection slips known to the unknown poets of the world.

This proved mildly amusing – mild enough to keep me from laughing hysterically, amusing enough to provide incentive to keep me submitting my poetry to the gatekeepers of the literary world.

By the time my wailing wall had reached its aesthetic apotheosis, I decided it might be time for me to pursue an alternate strategy.

I wrote my own rejection slip. A rejection slip rejection.

It read:

“The author regrets that he is unable to accept the enclosed rejection slip. This in no way reflects on the quality of the rejection, but rather on the author’s needs at the present time.”

Signed, in print, of course:

“The author.”

I took my manuscript to a local press, and had 500 printed, on vellumish cardstock, with an embossed frame. From then on, for next 30 or so rejections, I returned the rejection slips to the publisher, with my rejection slip attached – with high-quality paper clips, even.

I actually heard back from a couple publishers – with handwritten apologies, no less.

I still have 468 rejection slip rejections somewhere. I decided to go into teaching, instead.

The Out-Blessing game

Trying to out-bless people is much more fun than trying to outguess them. For this reason, I give you: The Blessing Game.

Sit in a circle. Whoever is so moved makes a blessing – any nice wish that that person wishes to wish on anyone else. Anyone else who is now so moved makes an even better blessing, trying to out bless the previous blessing.

Or, get in pairs. Put your hands on each other's heads. Take turns out-blessing each other. Continue until you both feel truly blessed or have had enough of this loving playfulness.

A round of out blessing might go like this:

- You say: May the fruits of your labors never spoil
- And I say: Amen. And may they all be delicious
- You say: Amen. And may they be always ripe
- And I say: Amen. May they be available in your local supermarket
- You say: On sale

Alternative Blessing Cycles

But if you do (or don't, or isn't)

- I say: May you never run out of toilet paper
- You say: Amen. But if you do, may there be a box of tissues near by
- I say: Amen. And if there isn't, may there at least be a sink in easy reach

Combined with the standard out-blessing exchange:

1. You say: With a clean towel right over it
2. I say: And a bottle of antibacterial soap
3. You say: And a can of deodorant

Followed by a return to the But If You Do or Don't or Isn't play:

- I say: And if there isn't any deodorant, may there be a window
- You say: Amen. And may it be easy to open
- I say: Amen. And may it lead to someplace outside the building
- You say: Amen. And may there not be a hurricane

Blessing Game Starters

Here are some out-blessing starters, to help you get, well, started:

- May you be happier than a lark
- May you never be taken to be sillier than you want to be or more seriously than you think you are
- May this blessing make more sense to you than it does to me
- May your optimism be based in realism and your pessimism totally unfounded
- May you be wise enough to know how lucky you are, and v.v.
- May all your accidents be happy
- May you have as much money as you know what to do with
- May you look happier than you have a right to be, and feel happier than you look
- May your injuries heal before anyone adds insult to them
- May all those who bless you be blessed
- May your misery have company

And finally, from a traditional Hebrew prayer: “May all the holes in your body that are supposed to be open stay open, and may all the other ones that should be closed stay closed.”^{vi}

Being Blessed

When my wonderful friend Zalman and his amazing wife were last in town, we arranged to meet in West LA for some hugs and Indian food. After dinner he and I and our delicious wives (Rocky, mine, Eve, his) were almost actually accosted by a briefcase carrying, suit-wearing man wielding a paperback book. Being the warm and terminally polite people we like to be, we were immediately subjected to a sales pitch of stunning complexity and only minimal coherence. He had written and published a book proving that Abraham's little-known wife Keturah was the progenitor of most of the civilized world and Denmark (something about the tribe of Dan).

Now, Zalman is a biblical scholar of great depth and high repute. When the bookseller asked rhetorically, "and, how many people know who Abraham's other wife was?" Zalman answered his question immediately. And yet never once in his entire monologue did the impassioned author deign to find out with whom he was actually speaking.

At the end of the pitch, the guy explained to us that he was going to offer us a very special opportunity. That for \$20 dollars, he'd not only sell us his book, but sign it, personally.

"All right," said Zalman, "I'll make you a bargain. I'll buy your book, but I want something extra."

"Of course," replied the self-proclaimed proclaimer, "I'll be happy to dedicate it to you or any person of your choosing."

"Thank you," said Zalman, "but I want something else. Something even more special. I want your blessing."

The fact is, I don't remember what the blessing was. But I do remember how Zalman, with his simple request, transformed this whole somewhat seamy encounter into a profoundly moving spiritual experience.

From that day on, I've made the Out-Blessing Game an integral part of my work.

There Must Be a Good Reason

So, here's the game. You decide on something you think is rude or just plain wrong, and you take turns coming up with good reasons for people behaving that way. Someone starts: "did you hear that guy honking his horn over and over?" And then you take turns building a better and better reason for his behavior:

- "maybe he's on his way to see his wife in the hospital"
- "and she just had a baby"
- "and she forgot what name they decided to call it"
- "and he's lost"
- "and running low on gas"
- "and his wife forgot her cellphone"
- "and the hospital called to say she keeps on asking for him"
- "and he has to go to the bathroom..."

It's fun. It's the kind of game you can play with the family, in the car, or at a restaurant or in the supermarket or in line. And it kinda lightens things up, even though maybe those people really are bastards.

My wife taught this game to me. She likes to play it with herself when she's driving or in some place crowded. Whenever someone does something rude, like cut in front of her, she tries to think of an explanation for that person's behavior. Not a condemnation. An exercise in compassion.

Human Spring

Played in pairs.

Stand facing each other, about arms length apart. Legs slightly spread for balance. Arms up. Elbows bent. Hands palms out.

On a mutually acknowledged signal, lean towards each other without bending, until hands meet. Then push against each other's hands so that both players spring back to the upright position.

It's kinda like vertical push-ups.

Continue until you are filled with confidence at your mutual abilities. Then step back a bit and try again.

And so on, a bit further apart each time, until you've gone far enough, and you both are amazed at the combined length to which you can go in the name of fun.

Or you fall down.

It's not just about trust, or risk, or foolhardiness. It's also about connection, connecting, about relationships, about being there for each other.



Mutual Meditation

Hold each other's wrists so that you can feel each other's pulse. If you don't want to hold on to each other's wrists, any pulsing part of each other's anatomy will do. The stronger the pulse the better. On every other pulse, say the word 'Me.' Continue doing this until you hear the 'we.' Then start saying 'we.' Perhaps on every third pulse. Saying 'we' over and over again, listening, of course, for the separate and yet co-joined 'Me.'

Follow the Follower

Turn on some gentle music and sit facing each other. One of you is the reflector. The other the reflectee. The reflector simply does whatever the reflectee does. Continue in these roles for 10 inhales. On the 11th, change roles. Continue thusly for the next 8 inhales, and, on the 19th change roles again. Continue in like manner until you can't tell who is the reflector and who is the reflectee.

Handland

Lie on your backs, with your heads together, ear-to-ear, and your feet at opposite ends. Put both your hands straight up in the air, above your face, so you can see each other's hands. Think of it as a stage up there, where your disembodied hands can carry on conversations, speaking in your disembodied voices. You're on your backs, hands in the air.

You let your fingers do the talking. It's like shadow puppetry without the shadows. Hand shaking. Hand slapping. Hand music. Hand dancing. And whenever you need to thicken the plot, bring in the Foot Beings, the dialog with whom invariably leading to a semi-yogic collectively calisthenic Whole Body Air Theatre.

Food Theatre

- 1) Prepare at least five or so finger foods, each with a different crunch. For example: cranberry sauce, cashews, ginger snaps, cheese nips, and garbanzo beans.
 - 1.a) Place each in a small saucer or cuplet. Make two sets.
 - 1.b) Decide who is going to be the first Chewer.
- 2) Blindfold the listener. The listener places an ear to the Chewer's cheek.
 - 2.a) The Chewer takes a small piece of one of the foods, and chews as necessary.
 - 2.b) The goal, if one is needed, would be to identify what is being chewed, and perhaps how much of it, along with some estimate of swallow duration.
 - 2.c) Or perhaps both Chewer and Chew Detector, both chewing and listening at the same time whilst simultaneously attempting to identify what the other is eating.

Estimated duration: 3-8 minutes. Activity is often left incomplete due to hilarious incapacitation.

Dessert Roulette

One of my favorite Food Theatre Games was taught to me by my wonderful and far-too-long gone friend Burton Naiditch. He called it: Dessert Roulette. This is just one version: You're in a restaurant. And you order one more dessert than there are people. Place the desserts in the center of the table.

Simultaneously, reach for the dessert of your choice. Take more or less a bite, and return the dessert to its tablecentric position. Play repeatedly. The first dessert to be eaten is the winner. And so is everyone else.

For more variety, add more desserts. Or, make it the rule that you can't move a plate, but rather must fork the dessert into your mouth, even if the dessert is located across the table. Or, you might each try to select the dessert that you think your partner wants, take a forkful, and then try to feed each other simultaneously. To increase the challenge, you might add reservoirs of dessert condiments (bowls of whip cream, crushed nuts, non-fat fudge), making dessert-forking a two-stage operation. Or forget the fork and use your fingers to feed each other.

P.S.

You can't make your self more playful. Just like you can't make your self dry when you're getting rained on. Sure, you can be playful, even when you're caught in the rain. You can laugh and splash and have your self a merry old time. But you can't make your self dry. Not until you get out of the proverbial rain.

Most often, your state of playfulness is like a state of grace. It happens. Not necessarily because of anything you're doing or choosing or are. Not because you're so spiritual or wise or talented. But more because you are, for the moment, being blessed.

Sometimes it's a squirrel that makes that particular blessing, or a child, or a lover or a cloud or the rain. Sometimes those very beings and things are the very reasons you're not feeling or acting so playful.

Sure, the more you play, the more you get to be playful. Even more sure, the more you get to be playful the more likely it is that you'll respond playfully to just about anything.

But it's never just you that makes you so playful.

Most of the time it's you and something else - like you and the wind, or you and the play of light, or the play of something alive, or the reflection of light in someone's eyes, or you in the reflection of someone else's moment of delight, or you and the touch of wind on your body, or the touch of a child or a pet or a lover or the rain.