

Play

**“Play is the bridge between
mastery and mystery
chaos and control
the foolishly brave and the bravely foolish.”**

- the Oaqui

There are two kinds of Childhood Truths, and one of them is eternally true, true as any other kind of truth, adult or divine. It's that kind, the childhood kind that is true forever, that forms the basis for a playful path.

It's during childhood that we learn what fun is for and games are about. It's during childhood that we follow a playful path whenever we are allowed to, without having achieved professionalism, or certifiability, or even permission. It's what we do when we don't hurt. When we're not crying. When we feel so good that we giggle.

It's also during childhood that we contact and develop our “Inner Adults” – making promises, pretending we're not playing. And as we got to grow up and up, we got better and better at this dialogue, until everyone believes it of us, almost all the time, and eventually, we believe it, believe we're not playing, too. And that's the second kind. The kind that leads us to believe that all those truths we discovered in play have nothing any more at all to do with us.

So I, as an adult, have become a teacher of the childhood truth of the first kind - the kind that believes in play. And day by day my commitment to teaching a playful path grows stronger, simply because we have so much to benefit from playfulness, at this particular time in our history, now that we are all so officially grown.

The path is playful, the Player sometimes not so much.

The other day I found my self writing about what it means to follow a playful path. I was working on the PR piece, listing all the “callings” that could

benefit from following such a path – you know: the playful teacher, the playful architect, the playful gardener, the playful therapist. And then I thought of firefighters, and then of the police and military, and then of doctors and dentists. And I wasn't so sure I wanted them to be following this playful path.

Playful Firefighters?

On the other hand, I spent a week with firefighters exploring a playful path, and we reached genuine heights of playfulness, and we saw that it was very good.

Because, I guess, there's so much more to firefighting than holding down a high-pressure hose. There's living together and working together and the profound joy of risking together and winning together.

And then I realized that it's the path that is playful, not necessarily the player. That to stay on a playful path, you merely have to play, fully.

The Sense of Play

The sense of play is a sense in every sense of the word. It is a sense, like sight is a sense, like hearing, like touch. If we tried to make a list of all the things we play and play with, the list would probably be as long as a list of all the smells, all the sounds, all things we touch, taste, feel, see.

We play with our bodies, we play with ideas, we play with toys, we play with pets, we play with each other, we play games.

Play brings us into the world. Play brings us the world.

Play connects us. It is what we do to connect, to relate to each other, to build relationships, to strengthen the connections between us, to create community. Our understanding of each other, the love between us, grows deeper when we play together.

Play helps us understand how things work, how we can work with things.

At play, we create new things, new ideas – even when we don't speak the same language, don't come from the same neighborhoods, don't have the same abilities, aren't the same age, same family, same color, same gender, don't think the same, don't believe the same, don't act the same, don't wear the same uniform.

Because we can play we can imagine, we can pretend, we can make each other laugh. Because we can play we can make art, dance, song, music, we can make up stories, make jokes, music, songs, peace.

In play we explore, experiment, examine, express our very selves, we strengthen our bodies, our minds, our understanding of our changing selves, our changing relationships, our deepening love. Playing, we change, adapt to change, create change.

I rhetoricize:

Without this sense, the sense of play, what would we be? Would we be less than our selves? Other? Would we lose our selves, each other? Would it would be like being blind, deaf, multiply disabled? Would we become alienated, isolated? Would we be able to learn, to love, to raise our children, to appreciate them, to savor our lives, to delight in the world? Would we make our gardens beautiful? Would we be at war, forever? Without this sense would we find life, itself, senseless?

Life is play

We know that play is fun. And for some of us, that's all the purpose we need. But, as many scholars, theorists, psychologists, anthropologists and the like have noted – play seems to be beneficial, not just for the individual player, but for the entire species.

Brian Sutton-Smith has used the term “adaptive potentiation” to describe the value of play from an evolutionary perspective (he wrote about it most recently in his book *The Ambiguity of Play*^{xix}). Playing seems to nurture the development of a whole vocabulary of skills and arts and social forms. Many of these have no immediate value, neither to the survival of the player, nor of the species. But some do. Rock throwing, for example. Juggling, maybe not so much. Brian's example: a guy who's good at throwing a baseball would be equally good at throwing a hand grenade.

OK, this is just me thinking, and I'm not sure how I feel about all this, speaking of ambiguity and things, but it seems to me that this idea of adaptive potentiation is manifest in our very genes. Here, let me quote from a scholarly article on variation and adaptation.^{xx}

“Natural selection does not produce uniformity or perfection. Instead, it generates variability that persists when it helps a species to adapt to, and thrive in, its environment. It acts on phenotypes, not on genotypes, and it is not a process that always discards individual genes in favor of others that might produce traits better suited for survival.”

See. Variability. Adaptive potentiation in action. It's like genetic. Like these guys say when talking about, forgive me, cancer:

“When cells in our body change their genome and develop into cancer, we blame it on genome instability. When novel species conquer inhospitable environments, we credit it to genome evolution. From a cellular perspective, however, both processes are outcomes of the same fundamental biological properties-genome and pathway plasticity and the natural selection of cells that escape death and acquire growth advantages. Unraveling the consequences of genome plasticity at a cellular level is not only central to the understanding of species evolution but also crucial to deciphering important cell biological problems, such as how cancer cells emerge and how pathogens develop drug resistance.”^{xxi}

So, what I seem to be conjecturing here is that this instability, this variability built in to the very structure of the genome, this rampant proliferation of alternatives, is the very essence of

play. It's what we do when we pretend, imagine, create, play around. We create alternatives. We generate variability. Not out of necessity. Out of whim. We proliferate games and stunts and skills no one needs. Not out of the need to adapt to change. But rather out of the need for fun. And if play is all about adaptive potentiation, and, at least from the perspective of cancer cells and the survival and evolution of our species, and probably every species, variability is what makes the whole thing work – then all of it is play. All of it. Play is in our very blood. Literally. All of it, of life is play. At its most fundamental level. At the smallest and highest expression of its evolution.

Master players

Many people have come into my life, played with me, and left me happier, healthier and wiser.

There's Bill Doran:

There we were, up in the barn, playing with our brand new, thoroughly researched, ultimate ping pong table. That barn was the center of what we were calling The Games Preserve. We wanted to fill it with not only every game on the planet, but the very finest manifestation of each. And Bill chose that particular table, and those particular paddles and balls, and installed that particular kind of lighting for precisely that reason. It was not just a ping pong table. It was table tennis.

Bill knew that I couldn't really play ping pong. And I knew that he could really, really play. And because we wanted to play together, we just more or less volleyed (he more, me less). After a while, Bill suggested that I just try to hold my paddle still enough so that he could get the ball to hit it. Apparently, that was more than challenge enough for him. And for me, every time the ball actually crossed the net, hit my paddle, and got back to Bill was sheer magic. After a while, we managed to get an actual volley going, Bill exercising the depth and fullness of his ping pongly skills, me magically holding my paddle where it needed to be. And after a longer while, we got a very, very long volley going. And during that volley, the ball seemed to take on its own, almost internal light, as if it were inhabited by our spirits, Bill and mine, combined. And it was, for an instant, as if we were seeing God. Honest. When we left the barn, we were like two Buddhist monks having just achieved enlightenment.

Then there's Mick Greene, one of the two playful brains behind Streetplay.

<http://www.streetplay.com/>

I had led a brief session of tabletop golf for about 150 teen-agers and associated adults. For some reason, it just didn't work. (These kinds of sessions, the ones that don't work, have proven very formative for me, in hindsight. Unfortunately, when I receive that particular gift, I am generally too shaken to acknowledge how much I have profited from it, even when I do get paid.) I had invited Mick to come see me at play. And, clearly, what happened was not what I had wanted to share with him, or anyone. I looked at Mick. He at me. And the next thing I knew we were walking out of the conference room, meandering into the parking lot. We didn't talk much. He understood that I needed quiet and space. As it happened, the parking lot was almost empty.

As we were walking across the clearly delineated parking spaces, Mick produced one of his

favorite therapeutic devices – a spaldeen. “Hey, Bern,” said he to me, “ever play fivebox^{xxii}?” I didn’t remember the game. And my interest was significantly piqued. So we started playing. Just like that. We stood five parking spaces apart. He bounced the ball into the space closest to me. And I tried to catch it. Only he tried to throw it so I could catch it. Then I did the same for him.

It was another ping pong-like experience for me, given the difference between skill sets – he clearly proficient, I vividly not. And, like my friend Bill, Mick managed to get the ball to bounce right into my hand. Having accomplished that, it was my turn to throw into the space two spaces in front of him. Eventually, I found my self playing at a level that appeared to me as something approximating competence. And the more we played, the more distant the disappointment of that tabletop golf game became, and the closer Mick and I came together, and the more vivid the fun.

Then there are kids. Not all kids, but some certain kids who seem to understand exactly what they need to do to keep other kids, and even adults, in play.

In all cases, there’s a sensitivity, an empathic connection, a deep understanding of the game, and, even more profoundly, of the connection between players. In every instance, there’s a willingness to adapt the game to the players – to let go of things like having to win, having to demonstrate your competence, having to keep to the rules – so they can hold on to the spirit of play, share in the playfulness of the spirit.

I’ve decided to call people like Bill and Mick “master players.” They are skilled in the game, and they understand, at a deeper level, that a game is for keeping each other in play.

I’m concluding that this idea, this term “master player,” is a very useful one for us to share. And I further conclude that you, your self, could be such a master player, or have in any event played with one or several such. And that you also realize how valuable it might be to think even more about the healing value of being such a person, or playing with such a person, or child, or pet.

Play and getting paid to play

On getting to play

Play makes things new. Even the oldest games, even the most rule-bound, traditional, ancientest of games are made new again each time they are played. Otherwise, they wouldn't be fun.

They're made new by the way in which they're played, by the individual and collective genius of the players. In sports, it's a new strategy, or even better, a new expression of physical excellence that renews the game.

But the newness is limited, significant only to the professional player and dedicated fan. New enough to sometimes make the game spectacular, but not new enough to go beyond spectacle.

Even New Games (those described in the New Games books and carried forward by teachers of New Games) are not by themselves really New enough. Alternatives, definitely. And joyful ones at that. But not new enough to redefine, undefine the players. Not new enough to bring us to the edge of individuality, to cross the boundaries of personhood. Not new enough to touch the mystery, to reach through to the ridiculousness of all those things that separate us in the first place, and the second.

Because, no matter how new the game, a game can be no more than an invitation to play. It's not the game itself, it's play that renews us. Play without goals, rules, reasons. Play per se.

And the quality of the game, the well-playedness of it all, frequently has little to do with the game itself, little to do with the goodness of the players themselves, and everything to do with the unqualified goodness of being in play.

Play is a taste of health. A momentary engagement in the natural exuberance, exhilaration, ebullience of life at its liveliest. An affirmation of our boundless power, limitless capacities.

And when play is especially good, transcendentally, transformationally good, it's because of the people with whom we are at play, in play. The community of players. The people with whom we play community. The people with whom, when we are at one with our selves, we are at one.

On getting paid to play

It has always been my personal goal to get paid to play. I think that money is in fact the most genuine form of recognition our culture has to offer, that volunteerism results most often in token recognition, leading ultimately to token efforts. Systemically speaking.

I think that most of us who are similarly driven by our faith in fun are similarly driven, similarly aware that most organizations seem to systemically disregard the singular importance of joyful work.

Yes, yes, yes, the rewards of trust and friendship are without measure, and cannot be equated to the crass material joys of financial reward. And yet, as I go about marketing my various consultancies, I find my self, despite my occasional financial successes, despite the effectiveness of my trust-building team-building efforts, saddened, deeply, by the knowledge that the very system that is rewarding me for my playfulness is systemically punishing others for theirs.

It is precisely because of our systemic lack of recognition for the value and contribution of play that I am so intrigued by the possibility that there be extrinsic recognition and support for having fun. It is indeed often painfully confusing to be materially rewarded for what is already spiritually rewarding. I have often written about the insidious nature of trophies and prizes, and their profoundly negative impact on play and spontaneity. But what I am referring to here is my observation that we have built a system that rewards people for doing what they don't like doing, and that only gives passing recognition to any connection between enjoyment and productivity.

My quest here is for a system that recognizes and supports intrinsic reward. Recognizes it by providing the conditions for playful interaction, supports it by providing a reasonable salary for the fruits of those interactions.

Far too few of us are actually getting paid to play. Far too many of us are getting rewarded for joyless, self- and other-destructive "work."

Where are there systems of reward that are effective in recognizing and supporting the productive power of play? What systems reach beyond the fortunate few to create a generalized state of affirmation of personal happiness?

If we can find no precedent, may we be able to create our own.

Playing like a grownup

You know people who, when talking about play and playfulness, seem to always hark back to childhood and children's play and the endlessly joy-filled days we gloried therein?

I find my self spending a lot of time reminding those very people of the kinds of fun that our inner-child couldn't have when we were children, simply because we didn't know enough, we hadn't seen enough, we hadn't brought our own children into the world, we hadn't learned enough, experienced enough, discovered enough of our strengths, loved as strongly, worked as passionately.

Sure, we can play the same kinds of games we played when we were children, but experiencing those same games as adults, weaving them into the context of what we have since learned and experienced and dreamed, the games become something else, we become something more. We care for each other differently. We appreciate each other differently. We play with each other differently.

When we were children, we could only play as children. We couldn't really choose to be childlike, to be playful, to have fun, because it was what we did whenever we could, with or without permission or even intention. We didn't even know, let alone think of what we were doing as being particularly playful. But as adults, given the opportunity, finding the permission to come out and play together – we can bring all those years of power, experience, compassion, all those competencies and strengths, all the stories and histories, all our sophistication and post-pubescent powers into play. We can release the inner-adult. We can set it free to weave its majestically playful path into the fabric of the daily game.

The play between

I watched my son-in-law play with my grandchildren, wrestle with my grandchildren. And he, like a truly professional wrestler, filled with feigned fury, holding them all the while lightly, keeping them safe in his strong arms, always leaving them room.

This how I like to play with everything, with everyone. Leaving room. Leaving play between us. Play in the touch, in the reach. Connecting loosely, holding loosely. Because it is the play that we leave between each other, the play between, that the truth of us reveals itself to us. Not in the holding. Not in the letting go. But in the keeping safe.

It's a fine art, this playing between.

Out for a walk, you meet a stranger: a mother, wheeling a baby carriage. And because you are who you are, you want to taste that love, bless that love. So you say something light, something kind, something about the innocent beauty of the very young. You say it in such a way so there's room between you – room for the love to show itself, share itself, make itself felt. Room for the safety to be sensed. Room to hold closely. Room to let go. Room to let in the light.

And in that safe, protected space between you, the play between you takes place. Facing together the fragile, ephemeral, intricate complexity of a new human life, you shape and share a moment of awe. And then you walk on.

Of all the spaces in which we find each other, this space, the space between, the moment lightly held, where we face each other freely, is where the play is deepest. And when we turn away, as we must, the sense of play, of lightly held love, holds us lightly, releases us, lightly.

This is the way we hold each other in the play between us, like the violinist holds her bow, like the strings release their sound, lightly.

Innocent intimacy

I'm especially interested in the innocent, intimate, safe, funny, profound kind of fun that we can achieve as adults. Unlike the innocence of childhood, this innocent, adult fun is based not on ignorance, but on informed openness. It's an intimacy that goes beyond sexuality to create moments of physical, emotional and spiritual union that make us larger than life. The kind of intimacy that is built on trust, respect, on our abilities to keep each other safe, to make each other laugh, to hold each other close, to touch each other gently deep.

Play, laughter, health and happiness

In the process of growing up, most people lose touch with the sources of their personal power. Those sources: play and laughter, especially when they are whole-hearted, whole-minded, whole-bodied. When people play and laugh, and play and laugh fully, and especially when they play and laugh playfully, they are engaged, involved, in charge.

That's it. That's all you need to know. As long as you are playing playfully and laughing playfully, a playful path is more likely than not to be the path you're on. And as long as you stay on a playful path, you make even the daily game more fun.

That's the thing about a playful path. As soon as you stop playing, or stop laughing fully, or stop playing playfully, suddenly you're somewhere else, on some other kind of path, a path that is most definitely not a playful one and ultimately not particularly fun.

There's a direct connection between the experiences of alienation and stress and the amount of enjoyment people have. Simply put, the more alienated and stressed people are, the less fun they seem to be having, the less playful they seem to be.

Whoever chooses to respond playfully can be said to be a "traveler on a playful path" – someone making, having and being fun.

What is odd, especially to those of us who have, from time to time, walked that very same playful path to which I herein allude, is that people would choose any other way to experience the world. Why would you not want to follow a playful path? What other path is better designed to take you to happiness? What more reliable guide to happiness than fun and creativity, spontaneity and responsiveness, laughter and playfulness?

Laughter

It seems to me that the whole idea of "laughing for no reason"^{xxiii} and all the documented good that comes from doing just that, is exactly that – an invitation to return to a playful path.

I have one more such invitation. Today, I'm calling it "playing for no reason." Because, like what happens when we laugh for no reason, when we play for no reason we are reminded of how easy it can be for us to bring a new level of vitality to our selves and each other, to our significant others and all they signify, to those we care for and care for us.

Playing for no reason, playing what we're calling "Playful games," we rediscover:

- the art and science of fun
- how we can make things more fun for our selves, and everyone around us

Playing and laughing together, especially when we play and laugh in public, for no reason, is a profound, and, oddly enough, political act.

Political, because when we play or dance or just laugh in public, people think there's something wrong with us. It's rude, they think. Childish. A disturbance of the peace.

Normally, they'd be right. Except now. Now, the peace has been deeply disturbed – everywhere, globally. And what those grown-ups are doing, playing, dancing, laughing in public is not an act of childish discourtesy, but a political act – a declaration of freedom, a demonstration that we are not terrorized, that terror has not won.

A Frisbee, in the hands of people in business dress in a public park, is a weapon against fear. A basketball dribbled along a downtown sidewalk, is a guided missile aimed at the heart of war. Playing with a yo-yo, a top, a kite, a loop of yarn in a game of cats' cradle, all and each a victory against intimidation. Playing openly, in places of business, in places where we gather to eat or travel or wait, is a gift of hope, an invitation to sanity in a time when we are on the brink of global madness.

Yes, I admit, I am a professional advocate of public frolic. I am a teacher in the art of fun. I hawk my playful wares every time I get a chance, with every audience I can gather.

But this is a unique moment in our evolution. America is no longer bounded by its boundaries. We are tied into a network of terror that crosses national divisions with such consummate ease that we are as unsafe in our office towers as Israelis in a supermarket. We have been told that we are at some kind of war against some kind of terror. We are cautioned, daily, that none of us is safe. We have to protect the peace.

And I believe that we have far more powerful weapons than any military solution can offer us. And I believe that those weapons can be found in any neighborhood playground or toy store.

Public play and laughter are political acts, declarations that fear and terrorism have not won. Incontrovertible evidence that there is hope.

Health

Playfulness is one of the signs scientists look for when trying to determine the health of a herd of animals. The healthier the animals and the safer the herd, the more they play.

Playfulness, fun and happiness

As far as I understand playfulness (not far enough, yet, not far enough by far), it has something to do with being open, responsive, yielding to the moment, catching hold and letting go. You might not be playing at the moment, but you are willing to play, at the drop of a hat, the bounce of a ball, the wag of a tail. You are open to any opportunity. You are loose. Responsive. Present.

You have to be present to enjoy the sunrise, to delight in the light of your child's delight, because otherwise you simply aren't there to catch it. It goes by you as if it and you aren't even there.

Playfulness means presence, but not just presence. Responsiveness, but not just responsiveness. Presence and responsiveness, lightness and attentiveness, improvisation and creativity, a willingness to let go and become part.

We are surrounded, constantly, by invitations to fun, to play, to joy. There's nothing hard about finding fun. The hard thing is being present for it, the hard thing is recognizing it, the hard thing is accepting the invitation, even when you're the one that's doing the inviting.

When you are playful, you're like that. You see fun everywhere. Not just inside, but everywhere. You see the opportunity. And you take it. You see possibility. And you acknowledge it.

You definitely don't have to be playful to enjoy the sunrise or your baby's first smile. But if you are, chances are you'll see it when it happens.

I also have been known to quote the Oaqui saying "a playful path is the shortest road to happiness." I quote that because that particular path, the playful one, takes you to where the fun is. And if you are there, with the fun, the sheer fun of it all, well then, there, too, is happiness.

The same is true of the human herd. Especially herds of children. As long as the kids are healthy and feeling safe, left to their own resources, play is the thing they do.

Adults of the herd play less, at least observably, because for the most part they are not as healthy and definitely not as safe as they were when they were children. And when they are being playful, they tend to feel healthier, safer, almost like they did when they were kids, and maybe even better. Simply by playing, they reclaim their health, their community, their well-being, the energy of their youth.

Adult human beings are different than the adults of any other species I can think of, in that they can choose to be playful, even when they don't feel safe or particularly good.

Happiness

Happiness happens

Like rain happens. And the tide happens.

Happiness has little to do with you or me or my thoughts or your thoughts or anything we can do about them. And the only way we have to find happiness requires us to be there when it happens. Fully present and at our best.

The more we laugh, the more playful we become, the more likely it is that we're present enough to recognize happiness.

The more fun we have the more likely that we'll embrace happiness.

The more profoundly playful, the more deeply fun, the more thoroughly we laugh, the more likely we are to be fully there, fully at our best, so happiness happens with us.

Play and laughter are the gateways to health and happiness. As my friend Dr. Brian Sutton-Smith, Defender of the Playful, notes, the opposite of play is not work, it's depression.

Playing together, we discover trust. Laughing together, we discover harmony. Through play and laughter we transcend tragedy, we challenge our physical limits, we celebrate health, we create community, we redefine the daily game.

Play and love

The only time we can truly play together is when we play together as equals. What especially interests me is that we can do this even though we are not equal at all. When the old are playing with the young, the abled with the disabled, the expert with the novice, the human with the animal – as long as we share the same rules, as long as we can somehow agree that we will treat each other fairly, that, despite any “real” differences, we will not allow the inequalities to surface; we can play as if there were nothing dividing us, nothing separating, nothing differentiating.

When we are playing together, despite our differences, we celebrate a transcendent sameness, a unity that underlines the illusion of our separateness. You could call this an act of love – an enacted love that lets us keep the game going. Many acts of love, in fact, many acts of compassion, caring, trust, assurance.

This is the kind of play that takes place between all kinds of lovers: parent and child, between the older and younger, between you and your pets, between animals of different species. And it seems to me that it is this kind of play that has been the center of my awakening, for all these 45 years I’ve been playing and talking about playing; this kind of loving fun, this form of play that is, in its very essence, love.

It doesn’t seem to matter what kind of game we’re playing – competitive, cooperative, planned, spontaneous, new or old – if the game is played between beings who are not equal in power or ability, and if we can keep it fun, it is almost as if we play in defiance of each other’s differences.

This is very different from the kind of play we find in formal sports and games, where players are professionals. Under the competitive contract, it is a struggle between near equals – the nearer, the better. People of almost equal strength and build, knowledge and skill. People who are so much the same that we can tell them apart only because they are wearing different colors, or because they stay on their own sides of the field or board.

But when we play in acknowledgment of our differences, it is never the game that really keeps us together. It is always and only our desire to play with each other, our need to keep our selves and each other in play. It is merely an act of love.

It never was a question of who wins or loses, as the cliché has it. The truth and marvel of any game has always been found in how, despite everything that divides us, we manage to play it, together.

Play and death

Dying isn't fun. Being dead, in all likelihood, is not fun. Someone else's death, even a pet's death, is not fun. And yet, and yet playing dead is immensely fun. Fun of such immense immensity that we have managed to immortalize it in games like Ring Around the, you know, Rosy. Rosy, as in if you see a rosy splotch on your bod, and ring, as in if there's a ring around it, then, ashes is what you're way to becoming, ashes ashes, and we all ultimately fall, like, down. And, you know, laugh.

And there's playing dead. You know, just plain playing dead. And pretending to die. That's the fun of playing Cowboys and Indians (or whatever the more currently politically incorrect version might be): the pretending to die part. Clutching the imaginary arrow as it penetrates your core, falling back into the arms of your fellow defenders, or not, "ya got me," you moan, foamingly swooning into momentary oblivions. And how about all those shoot-'em-up computer games where the only way to figure anything out is by getting killed by something.

And we grow, and still we need to play with death. There's, for further example, one of my favorite dying games, J'Accuse, and countless Vampire-themed games of death and resurrection. And Mafia and Werewolf. And so very many video games, oh yes.

Like anything else we need to understand, especially when it comes to big, hurting things that are too big, too painful to grasp, death and dying are things we need to play with. Over and over again. Not because we need to understand them. But because it's the only way we can even begin to accept them as real.

Confluence

As we get deeper and deeper into the flow state, more and more of our capabilities are engaged, we become more complete. To be more complete we need to be involved in a task that is complex enough to engage us completely, to engage all our attention, all our capabilities.

Sometimes, as in a well-played game, we are engaged with others who are also engaged. We, as a community (WE), are completely engaged – body, mind, senses – in flow. And so are those with whom we are playing. And (here is what makes confluence such a useful concept) we are each (ME) also engaged with each other, in each other, to such a degree that we each increase the other's engagement. The very experience of completeness becomes expanded. We go beyond our selves.

Confluence is an experience that seems to be almost universal in the fun it brings us. It's a common experience – common not only to us, but to other species. It has a lot of different names: harmony, togetherness, flocking around.

Confluence means “flowing together.” It is used to describe where streams flow together to create a larger stream.

We experience something like confluence when we're just by our selves, talking to our selves, reflecting, and all the various voices, awareness, and abilities that we have to engage with our selves all seem to be in accord, in harmony, balanced in an easy-going, natural familiarity. It's like what happens when an artist lets the materials she is using have a say in what she is creating. Her art becomes a dialog. And, during that dialog, she becomes immersed, engaged, attuned, until she and the materials arrive at something new.

We sometimes experience something like confluence when we are at work, or at play, writing something, drawing something, building something, and the dialog between what we are making and what we are hoping to make seems very relaxed, easy going, materials and intentions fitting together like dancers improvising to a new music.

But when we dance with someone else, that experience takes on an added dimension. We are, as Martin Buber^{xxiv} would say, immersed in a relationship with the Other.

Confluence runs very deep in the core of our being. It is something we share, not only with each other, but with birds, fish, mammals and maybe insects, and who knows, molecules, atoms, even.

OK, so maybe (just maybe) molecules and atoms and insects and animals don't exactly find,

well, joy and comfort in each other. But they find something. They most definitely seem, shall we say, attracted to each other. But because we can't be sure, let's, for the sake of agreement, think about confluence as a human experience – a shared human experience.

There are many ways in which we human beings share experience. Some are more fun than others. The most fun seems to involve the deepest sharing, sharing on the most levels: physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, social. And within each of those there are levels. From casual to intimate, light-hearted to whole-hearted, wondering to wonder.

It's everywhere we are. Breathing together, hearts beating together, clapping hands together with each other, jumping rope together. And singing together, marching together, fighting together, and, don't get me wrong, thinking together – even if we're thinking against each other, sitting down, playing a game of chess or scrabble, or even when we're not physically together, playing online, playing Words with Friends, drawing something.

Over time, over space, we reach a gradually deepening attunement, a leveling, a drawing together, even when it's so deeply in the background that we are only remotely aware of it, if at all, when we're online, even when we're in line, waiting together, or we are standing in a pasture, browsing over the next clump of grass, hovering between hunger and satiety, the connection between us comforts us, enlarges us.

Music helps. Rhythms. They synchronize us. Sometimes very deeply. Our bodies. Our awareness. Our breathing. All moving as one.

... and yes, sleeping together, and even more yes, making love... where we reach perhaps the deepest confluence, the most total.

I like to think of confluence, naturally, as a river. Well, as a meeting of rivers. And us...there are those of us just touching the rivers' edge, standing on the banks. And for those of us, there's a sense, a sound in the very background of our beings, of harmony, of unheard voices, rivulets of consciousness joining the rhythms of the water. Connected, by the merging rivers, to those of us who have gone deeper to be moved together by the crossing currents until the sheer power of their collective presence washes away all fear, all distinctions, all the things that divide them one from their selves from the other, and they become so deeply immersed in the rivers, and in each other's presence, that it seems nothing is left of them but their laughter, and the whole river is set alight, and even the people on the shores sparkle free.

Confluence. As hidden or fragile as we be, should that connection break, so would we.

Unlike the experience of coliberation, there are no fixed boundaries to confluence. You find your way to that place where you are in consonance with everyone else, when you are all in flow together, and, inevitably, because the equilibrium is constantly changing, you find that

you are not there, not experiencing the same thing. The only warning you get is a sense of becoming increasingly distant – either from the community or from your self. The problem is, you usually can't tell which.

Once you experience confluence, you are as completely there as you can be, at one with your self, at one with the community, at one with the game, making magic.

To achieve confluence, you need to be freed from the constraints of ego and identity, and to be freeing others from being judged by anything other than their performance in the game. Once this is achieved, you are free to experience confluence. To maintain that connection, because people are constantly changing, everyone needs to be responsive, to be playful. That is why you play together.

You're at a party.

Everyone is having a simply marvelous time. Dancing, talking, nibbling, chatting, laughing, being everso amusing and amused, simply loving each other and themselves.

You, on the other hand, are feeling out of it. They're all so noisy, so self-involved, so insensitive to, well, you. You are not your self. And the longer you stay, the less your self you seem to be.

Then, sometime later, there's this other party. You've napped, composed one of your best poems, had a remarkably full-emptying bathroom experience, bathed, eaten a light but filling meal, and dressed, if you must say so your self, impeccably. In sum, you are remarkably together. You open the door, and people are just milling around, not really talking to each other. Some are carrying around plates of food, not eating. Others are standing by the bar, drinking, seriously. There's no music. No games.

Confluence is a connection (one of many) between a community and another entity: another community, or, in this case, you. When you and the community are in confluence, you are in flow together.

There are many different arts and organizations that are devoted to making confluence more available to us. For example, there's the theater where we find rows of theater-style seats facing a theater-style stage surrounded by a theater-style proscenium arch and hidden by a theater-style curtain. By creating a physical separation – an actual boundary between the community (actors, director, technicians, etc.) the community of watchers (audience) – by appointing other individuals (the director, conductor, announcer) to act as liaisons between the community of performers and the community of spectators, by establishing clear conventions to guide the conduct of the audience, physically reinforcing the distinctions; we make it possible for the performers to reach for confluence, and the audience to share in the perform-

ers' and each other's.

Rules and conventions that maintain a distinction between audience and performers make it possible for people to experience confluence while at varying degrees of personal involvement. The demands on the performer are far more complex than those on the audience member, but so are the expectations. Moments of confluence between the audience and performer are equally powerful for both audience and performer. From time to miraculous time, the performers are in their moment of confluence, the audience is in its moment, and both audience and performers in confluence with each other.

Then there's the sports arena with its clear and inviolable divisions between spectator and players. Official referees and announcers, official marching bands playing the officially national anthems, halftime performances, special lighting – all making it possible for the spectators not only to spectate, but to participate in, and even to influence the experience shared between the players, between the spectators, and between the spectators and the players.

In less formal situations, like parties, we use food, games, music, dance, dress; we create distinct areas dedicated to particular activities, we rely on the hosts and the friendship between participants – all to establish and maintain a more general, varied, and accessible experience of confluence.

Party games are particularly effective at inviting confluence because their rules and structures are easily distinguishable from less structured experiences. They invite people to act as players (narrowing their range of behaviors to a rule- and role-bound relationship). They provide a specific goal. They create a distinction between players and audience or observers. And they have a special meaning, divorced from other purposes or interpretations, that allows players to act playfully in ways that are unique to games.

Like the audience at a performance, non-players can both participate in and influence the experience of those who are involved, but only to a minimal degree. Non-players are free to observe, encourage players, or to wander off and join other activities where they might participate in or create a more confluent (for them) community.

Dancing, on the other hand, seems to lend itself to less structured, shifting moments of confluence between different partners, while remaining open enough to embrace a partyful of people in a moment of deeply shared spontaneity.

And it's not all fun and games. Confluence plays a central role in the effectiveness of the military, and is supported by the wearing of uniforms, the hours of marching and months of shared, strenuous exercise. Protest movements are similarly nourished by moments of confluence, and similarly structured so that these moments are likely to arise (living together, marching together, carrying signs, braving the authorities together). In the courtroom, jurors

are assigned their own area and confined to a special set of rules. In like manner the judge, lawyers, witnesses, the courtroom observers and even the accused and accuser all have roles and rituals which help establish a sustainably focused, confluent community.

Casinos, coffee shops, courtyards, clubhouses, and cruise ships; restaurants and night clubs; hotels, resorts, arcades, classrooms, playgrounds, cafeterias, assembly halls, recreation centers, retreat centers, kitchens, parks, family rooms, conference rooms, movie theaters, child care centers, fitness centers, museums, hotel lobbies, libraries, shopping centers, public squares, food courts, hospitals and fire stations; our culture rests on institutions that foster confluence.

Confluence plays an equally central role in family and marital relationships, and is also supported by very clearly defined rituals and occasions. Celebrations, outings, eating together, playing and working together, even lying around in front of the TV together; all make the experiences of confluence more accessible to those participating in the relationship.

Confluence plays a similarly central role in animal life. Ants and bees, herd animals and monkeys, fish and birds are all drawn together by the transcendent joy of confluence, even when they're only flocking around.

Then there's education, politics and religion: the rituals, officials, costumes, ceremonies, edifices... Don't get me started.

The experience of confluence is the glue that binds us to a social setting, the promised reward that keeps us seeking each other out. Being involved in something together, feeling something together, experiencing togetherness, we feel safer, stronger, we transcend the limits of self.

Coliberation

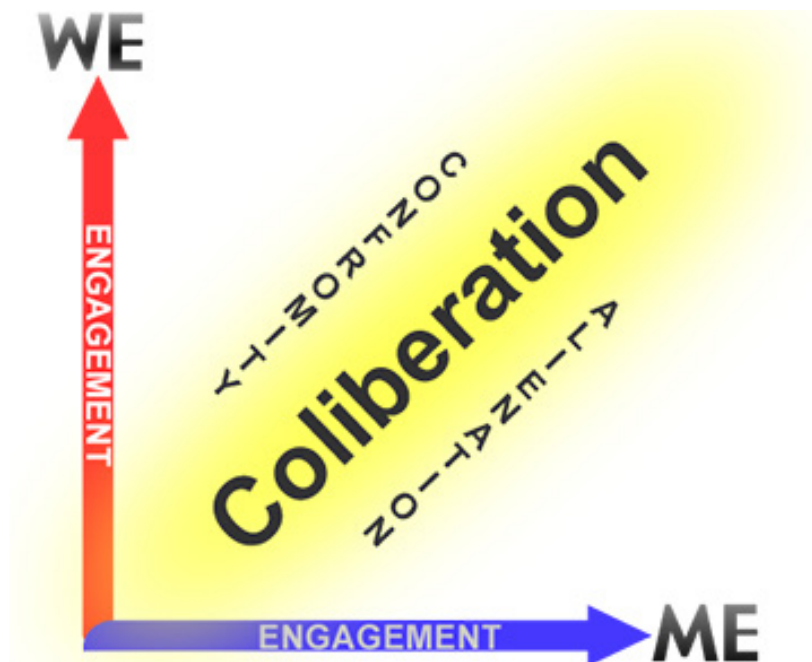
When we play or work or do anything very well with others. I mean really, extraordinarily well together - like on a basketball team or in an orchestra, when we actually experience our selves sharing in something bigger than any one who is present. This is what I call the experience of the “Big WE.” It’s a corollary to the “Big ME” experience of self-transcendence. If the Big ME is the “peak experience,” “coliberation” or the Big WE, is like becoming a whole mountain range.

Big or little, the experience of WE is something found in a different dimension than the ME. It’s the oddly tangible experience of relationship, of connection, of community. Oddly tangible, because it can’t actually be found in any one of us, but only in the experience of both or all. It’s a collective consciousness of which we may be only dimly aware, and yet completely embraced by, identified by and with. And when this WE is so engaged as to form a solidarity, a oneness, and when the will of the one is one with the will of the many, it becomes transformed, and we with it.

I know I’ve experienced it in games and sports and the performing arts. And, what makes me especially hopeful, I’ve also experienced it in business meetings.

Coliberation is a shared transcendence that makes you feel just about as big, ME-wise and WE-wise, as you can get. Larger than life. Enlarged by each other’s largesse. Beyond time.

Allow me to illustrate.



The higher or farther out we go on each line, the more fun, the more complete it feels to be a ME or WE. The closer in, the less.

When the WE and ME are in balance, there is mutual empowerment, what we might as well call the state of “coliberation.” Imagine that this is indicated by a channel, diagonally equidistant between ME and WE. Make the channel sparkle for illustrative purposes. Here the good meetings, the well-played games, the fun things happen.

Fun is the background, the context, the steady state. Games are the rules that help us move up or down the channel, towards and away from the Bigger ME or the Greater WE.

And speaking of those exceptional experiences of playing together or working together when we’re really playing or working and really together; as deliciously distracting as the philosophies and technologies of collaboration may be, when collaboration is at its best, so are we.

The experience of coliberation is beyond confluence. it becomes more powerful as each participant becomes more thoroughly engaged, more wholly involved, and as the group itself becomes more unified, more engaged. Given the wholeness of the self and the group, we approach something beyond cooperation, beyond the game or meeting itself. Some coincidence of selves that undefines the limits of our capabilities. A coincidence having almost nothing to do with the game or meeting, and everything to do with the human spirit – shared moments of unusual clarity, vivid communication and spontaneous combustions of understanding.

It’s almost silly even to have a word like this, because if you’re having fun you’re already experiencing coliberation. You can’t have fun with others if you’re the only one playing. You can meditate, but you can’t separate. You can become one only if you become “one with.”

The shared Whee

What am I doing when I'm pushing you on a swing? Are we competing? Are we cooperating? I think we're doing something else entirely. I think we're sharing the whee.

I'm not sure if this is one of your typical flavors of fun. It's more like the very essence of fun, like fun itself, when it's shared. And I wouldn't be surprised if there are as many kinds of whee as there are flavors of fun, the shared whee being only one of many (or several of many). And in all likelihood there are whee degrees, all the way from the mini-whee to the really, really big whee.

We do a lot of whee-sharing: with kids, pets, lovers. Sometimes, one of us is the prime wheeer. Sometimes, we whee together, at the same time, for the same reason, feeling the same thing. And sometimes – and these are the best of times – we can't really tell who started the whee, or who's wheeing more.

Whee-sharing is why we find our selves at concerts, dances, in amusement parks, sports arenas, playgrounds. Why we play games. Any game. Even solitaire.

Even the solitaire whee, the whee that you find on a surfboard or mountain top, feels like a shared whee. You don't feel alone. You feel like the wave or the wind or the light itself is wheeing with you. Even on a slow stroll through the neighborhood it can get like that.

But me, I'm especially interested in the whee we find our selves together in. The you and me whee. The whee that comes from the core of something very much like love. The we-whee.

For Realing

Let's not call it "playing" for a while. Let's call it "realing" instead.

Really. Games aren't just pretend. They are also quite real events, shared realities. In fact, they are realities that we have created together, alternate realities, absolutely as real as we can make them be.

My best playmates have been those who made the game more real for me.

All right, now let's call them games again, knowing that what we really mean are "reallies."

As long as we are using games to mean "reallies" we could actually think of every reality as yet another game - the daily game.

This is very handy.

As intimate as we may be with our personal realities, we do tend to get lost in them. But, if we think of our many reallies as games, well, we can at least assume it's all right to try to have a little more fun.

We can make even more useful assumptions about the real existence of things like rules and roles, losing and winning, cheating and quitting.

We can also ask some very liberating questions. Such as, if "life" for example, is (or might as well be) a game, why, actually, isn't it more fun? After all, what's a game for?

So, all right, every "really" is a game, and vice versa, and when I say one I mean the other. Which means that every Really we can name should and can be more fun.

Let's test this idea out on some "reallies" that are really Big, but at least a little smaller than Life:

Death, for example, is one of your Bigger Reallies.

Everybody knows that death is really a Really.

Even death should and can be more fun.

We are fortunate in having many authorities on the play value of death: the sky-diving,

hang-gliding, bungee-jumping, rock-climbing death-defying people who actually risk their lives to play with death (but are still winning).

For these people it's so much fun to 1) think you might really die and 2) not die, that they spend enormous efforts and fortunes to experience item 1, only to eventually be proven wrong about 2.

Life, on the other hand, doesn't seem to have produced very many people who can attest to its ultimate play value. It might be because it's just too big of a Really to describe. But, enjoy life? Have fun? What else is there?

And yet, despite our wanting to have fun in life, for many, for most of our lives, well, the fact is, there's a lot about life we just don't like.

Which makes us very unwilling, as mature adults, to play life, or to pay much attention to those who try to tell us that we can make the Big Really more fun.

And so, our most popular games, and, oddly, our most popular religions all seem to defy (deny) 1) death, and 2) fun.

And if that's not silly, what is?

Really.

On being loose

When I first met him, Bill and his wife Linda had a pizza and sub store in northeast Philly. Later, he not only helped me conceive of, develop, realize the Games Preserve, he lived there. He and his family with me and mine. And we built together and grew together. And what we grew, grew into the Games Preserve. For ten years.

Then my family and I moved away from the farm, sold it, literally, to the person who sold Bill and family that same farm. And then Bill and family eventually built a hugely successful (ask anyone in Mertztown, PA) restaurant called “Snuzzles.” In the mean time, my family and I moved to the heart of Silicon actual Valley. And lo, it was the beginning of the 80s, and I was one with the very thin ranks of people who designed new play principles for computer games, designing games in 4- or maybe even 8K for Commodore, Coleco and Atari and the PC. A world at least a way from the Games Preserve and Bill.

And one day, I think Rocky and I were on the front lawn of our Palo Alto house, Bill drives up, from, basically, nowhere, having crossed the bulk of our considerably bulky country, and he’s just there, with us, suddenly part of our lives again, unannounced, for no reason, not even to to be a walk away from Stanford actual University. But just to hang around.

And when ever I asked him if there was anything he wanted to do or see or talk about, he’d say:

“I’m loose.”

“I’m loose.” As in “Whatever.” As in “I’m here, ready to play, or not, with you...to be with you playing whatever we play together.” “Or not.”

And (could it really be in 2007 that he died?) I’m thinking about that particular flavor of fun he brought to our lives, teaching us what it “tastes” like to be “loose.”

In a way, in Bill’s way, to “be loose” is to be in a state of something like perpetual play, it’s the path itself, the playful one, the genuinely playful path that I have for so many years been teaching and learning.

“I’m loose,” he’d say. As if he were saying: “I’m that taste of fun that you get from being free, at no one’s beck or call other than whoever or whatever happens to beckon. I’m living that deeply freeing fun that comes with feeling free.”

Bill taught me this. Was this. A flavor of fun called “Loose.” The kind of fun that tastes like freedom.

And now, when I think of it, this idea of letting my self be “loose,” when I feel my self feeling the fun of feeling it, Bill is still with me even though he isn't.