

The Fun of Fun

“Don’t let the humor escape you.”

- the Oaqui

So, let’s say you’re playing something – a game, a musical instrument – or, you’re working on a puzzle, or taking a walk or daydreaming – for fun, you know. Not because it’s good for you or you feel you’re supposed to, or you need to do it, not for exercise or relaxation, not even for the health of it. You’re just sitting on a tire swing somewhere, spinning your self around, rocking back and forth or forth and back, watching some kids maybe. Beyond purpose. Beyond necessity. Led to this particular place and time, neither because of the lure of a carrot or the fear of a stick, but by your own free will. Freed from consequence. Freed from necessity. Freed from temptation or worry. Completely at play, swinging and turning, for no other reason than the fun of it.

Forgive me for asking, but what, precisely, is the fun of it? What’s so fun about doing nothing special, about sitting in a tire swing, about doing something just because you feel like doing it, about the feeling of it, about the free will, about being free from necessity, free from worry, from fear, free from thinking about hunger, free from worrying about illness, free from dwelling in pain or fatigue.

Maybe, I’m asking, maybe it’s the freedom itself that’s fun. Like people sitting in the street, playing dominoes together in the aftermath of a flood, just because they can, just because it frees them a little from the vicissitudes of it all. Not just that you have the ability to free your self like that – which is gift enough, amazing enough...but maybe because freedom itself is fun. Maybe fun itself is freedom. Maybe that’s why it’s so much fun to watch kids at play. Maybe that’s why we think kids are having so much fun. Or puppies for that matter. Because they seem so free from fear and worry and hunger and illness. Or young springboks springing the way they do, seeming freed from gravity. Maybe it’s the freedom.



When we are playing together, for no purpose, improvising, unscripted, spontaneous – maybe the fun we’re having together is freedom. Shared freedom. Freeing each other.

Whee!

When you find your self in the Whee! of things, you have gone somewhere beyond your self, joined something or body outside your self. You are not your self. Not just your self. And, at the same time, you are more your self than usual.

Sitting on a swing, for example, doesn't quite make it to Whee!land. Swing on a swing, and you're there. Beyond your self. Your self, writ big.

Every Whee! is shared. The Whee! you experience when you're swinging is a Whee! shared with gravity, with your body in the world, with space, with movement, with the rhythm of back and forth, with the leaning forward and back, the looking around and up and down, the people on the swings next to you, the people near the swing, the ground, the shadows, the air, the trees, the sun, the clouds, the sky.

Walking is sometimes Whee! Running maybe more times. Dancing almost always. Because more of you is involved, engaged, in play. Even if you're dancing by your self, you're not dancing alone. There's the music, even when there isn't. There's the rhythm of hands, arms, feet, hips. And when there are others to dance or not with, the Whee!, when it comes, seems bigger, seems to fill the mind, the heart, the body, the spaces between, the room.

There's always a Whee! to be part of. It's just that you're not always there to be with in it. You're somewhere else. Inside. Hidden. Smaller. Sometimes smaller even than your self.

There's a Whee! right here, in the reading of this, in the joining of rhythms (rhythms of your dancing glances, of your pulse, breath, of images, words and the silent hearing of what they speak to you of, taking you somewhere beyond your self, to a joining).

Come out, the words say, come out, come out, wherever you are.

Fun, pleasure and enjoyment

I was speaking with Lynda, my son-in-law's mother (how come there isn't a word for that in English? she's not my mother-in-law? but she most definitely is family!) about fun. "Isn't that the same thing as enjoyment?" she asked.

"Hmmm." I responded, stalling for some deep rumination time. They sure are close. Fun. Enjoyment.

Clearly, whenever you're having fun, you're enjoying your self. And vice, probably, versa. It's certainly the case when you're talking about minor fun. Like when you smell something sweet, or delicious, or just plain good. That's something you most definitely enjoy. And going somewhere or doing something just so you can experience those wonderful smells, well that's even more obviously fun.

Maybe the fun part of enjoyment comes from making the choice to do something you enjoy. Just knowing you're about to do something enjoyable makes it feel like fun. Especially when it's the only reason. "I think I'll go to the bakery and just stand there and smell things for a while." "I think I'll stop walking and bend all the way down just so I can smell that flower." Choosing to enjoy something is fun. Choosing to do something you enjoy is fun. Choosing to do something fun is fun.

Then there's pleasure. Pleasure is enjoyable. Pleasure is also fun. Like enjoyment is. And like enjoyment, the more you choose to do something for the sake of the pleasure you find in it, the more fun.

When you are following what I call the playful path, you choose to do things that are pleasurable and enjoyable. So it becomes difficult, if not silly, to make a distinction between fun, pleasure and enjoyment. As far as you're concerned (and me, too), it's all fun.

The sense of fun

People talk about “humor” as if it were a “sense” – like the sense of taste and touch and such. They also sometimes talk about the “sense of play” and “sense of fun” – and though it has nothing immediately to do with what we’re about to play with, there’s also the “sense of self” and “sense of community.” And then of course there’s nonsense, which I guess is also a sense.

These senses – the senses of humor and play and fun – are, as far as I can understand, genuine sensitivities. A person with a “good” sense of humor or play or fun can somehow sense just the right thing to do or say to make things fun or funny. When their sense of humor or play or fun is off, when they are “over the top” or seem too serious, they stop being fun, they just aren’t that funny.

Then there’s the senses of self and community. These play an important role in our senses of fun and play and humor. The better our sense of fun, play, humor, the better our sense of self, and our sense of community.

One of the easiest ways to sharpen your own sense of fun is to have it with others – when you and your friends, or your family, or your colleagues, are all being fun together. And, of course one of the easiest ways for you to be fun together is to play games, especially playful games. You’ll find examples of games of the playful kind pretty much wherever a game is mentioned in this book.

All of which is simply to help you start thinking about fun, because it has been my experience that the more often I think about it, the more often I notice my self having it.

The fun intelligence

You know how they talk about all these “intelligences” – like the “creative intelligence” and the “emotional intelligence” and the “mathematical...”?

Well, today I’ve been wondering if maybe “fun” is one of those “intelligences.” Maybe our whole ability to perceive fun and create fun, the whole complex of rational and emotional and physical processes is part of an Intelligence.

You know how you sense something is possibly fun or you sense the fun possibilities...you know how we talk about the spirit of fun or the feeling of fun...

So I’m thinking maybe there is this Fun Intelligence, and that those of us in particular who are particularly gifted with this Intelligence have in fact found it to be central to our survival: socially, emotionally, physically, spiritually, spatially, mathematically...

Which also leads me to think that this is an Intelligence we can foster, nurture, exercise, develop, teach.

As with any Intelligence, I guess the first question in determining its value and relevance is to ask if it has any contribution to make to our survival.

Good question.

On a social level, the Fun Intelligence is frequently all that stands between you and getting beaten to death by a gang of bullies. If your FI (Fun Intelligence) isn’t high enough, you tend to make fun *of* just when you think you’re making fun *with*. In the locker room or sports field, failure to perceive the fun intention of a slap on the ass becomes a slap in the face, which frequently leads to a punch in the nose.

On the inner playground your FI is often all that stands between you and catatonic schizophrenia. Your ability to laugh at your self, to decide not to take things so seriously, to make light out of your darker suspicions...

Intellectually, your FI helps you toy with problems that are simply too big to grasp, to keep your self alive to the possibility of unanticipated solutions and resolutions. And when it comes to your body, your FI leads you to new sensations, new levels of engagement, new ways to experience the world. It takes you into the deserts and the mountains and beside the still waters. It restoreth the freakin’ soul.

Which makes you think of course about FI and your spiritual development: how it strengthens your ability to perceive the play and interplay of the planetary consciousness; how it brings you into communion with dogs and cats, porpoises and pelicans; how it allows you to share in the play of the infinite wind on the eternal water....

For the fun of it, let's pretend that we have conclusively concluded that the Fun Intelligence plays a vital role in personal growth and the evolution of the species. And let us further pretend that we have similarly concluded that there is a high correlation between the Fun Intelligence and adaptability, creativity, spirituality, physical, mental, and social health.

Now we are free to address the all-important question: how can we foster the development of the Fun Intelligence? How, we ask further, can we help people whose Fun Intelligence is in danger of atrophy from prolonged misuse? How do we cure the chronically somber?

Can the Fun Intelligence be exercised, restored, expanded upon?

As a matter of fact, yes. It's through a practice I call "following a playful path." You could call it "Mindful Fun," but that might make you too serious about the whole endeavor. Following a playful path is playing for the purpose of having and sharing fun.

Which is pretty much what these games are played for - not for score or trophy or world rank, but for the sheer fun of it all. I call these games "playful" because there's no other reason for playing them than the sheer playfulness of it all. We're not playing them to prove how profoundly we trust each other or to demonstrate our bravery or reveal our inner depths. Playful games are purposeless practices, not a few of which have their origins in college drinking games.

It's a useful thing, this notion of "playful" when applied to games. The idea of "playful games" repositions the experience of play, realigns it to the spirit of play itself, to the spirit, itself.

The second component is the conversations we have between the games. These conversations are devoted entirely to the experience of fun. We talk about what it was like when the game was most fun, about how we might make the next game even more fun. We don't focus on individual performance. We don't try to find out who had the most fun or played the best. We focus only on the experience of fun, and how it can be deepened. As the practice continues, each game becomes like a laboratory for evoking, exploring and refining the experience of fun.

And the third is all about the conversations we have on our Inner Playgrounds, where we contemplate the "inner we," invite our deepest selves to play, free our selves to meet our selves in joy.

For most of us, the last time we exercised our capacity for generating fun was around the end of the first week of first grade. This is why when we do experience something really, deeply fun, we attribute it to the “inner child.” It takes time to rebuild the Fun Intelligence to full, adult capacity. Some of my classes were as long as five or six days, and still not long enough to help people fully recover from years of fun deprivation. And yet, it is my experience and conviction that by introducing the practice of following a playful path, we can reach even the terminally dour.

The spirit of fun

Fun is a spiritual thing. It is often a healing thing. It changes our perspective: on our selves, our bodies, our relationships, our community. It changes our energy, our mood, our world-view. It brings us moments of happiness, of peace, freedom. It frees us even from our selves.

Some games seem to call to the spirit. They can move you and your friends and the people who understand such things closer. Closer to each other, and to your self. They can make you better, healthier. They can make you a better person. For a while, at least. As long, of course, as they are fun.

On the other hand, if you really understand this (and I'm sure you do), you also understand all games give us this opportunity. Some just make it more obvious.

The art of fun

You know how they tell you that you “learn to appreciate” art? Like abstract art, classical music, even wine? Or maybe you don’t so much learn to appreciate as “come to appreciate.” Things grow on you, I guess. Or you on them. You develop a taste for things like Bach or Mondrian or french fries with mayonnaise.

One of the things I find my self doing, when I’m trying to help people have more fun in their lives, is this very one – helping them cultivate a taste for fun things – especially things that they don’t usually even think of as having a taste. A taste for fun. A sensitivity to the taste of fun, you might say. And so might I.

Others call this endeavor “the art of enjoyment.” It’s fun to think of it as an art. I mean, you’d think that if something is enjoyable you’d just automatically enjoy it. Like if a joke were indeed funny, you’d know it right away. You wouldn’t have to develop anything. You’d just laugh. On the other hand, your sense of humor does, in fact, develop. You can, actually, find humor in things that maybe you never looked at humorously before.

Like art. People who listen to classical music a lot sometimes comment about how a piece of music is funny. Did you know that a “scherzo” is a musical joke? I mean, are you supposed to laugh when you hear one? Then there’s Victor Borge and P.D.Q. Bach. They’re funny, all right. But the more music you know, the funnier they get. Actually, it’s not so much that they get funnier. But more like you get them.

So, the enjoyment of art, and, in deed, the art of enjoyment is predicated on some kind of learning. There’s art appreciation. And then there’s wine appreciation. And hot sauce appreciation. And, in general, just plain life appreciation. The more you learn about any part of it, the more you can appreciate it, the clearer the sheer fun of it.

This leads us to the art of fun, a.k.a. the art of enjoyment. It has a lot to do with appreciating, which has a lot to do with learning. Like riding a bike, catching a frisbee, skiing, skating, dancing. And also like, oddly enough, eating. There is an art to appreciating food. To practice that art, you pay attention to taste, you experience the textures, you differentiate between the smells, notice the presentation, the sensation, the effect on your energy, your body. And by paying attention, I mean appreciate. And by appreciate, I mean enjoy, and by enjoy, have fun with.

Unlike some kinds of learning, the kind of learning you do when you’re learning the art of fun is, in itself, fun. It may not be as much fun as you think you’ll be having once you come to master all the nuanced profundities and profound nuances and things. But if you’re doing

it right, you're having as much fun doing it as the fun your having learning about the fun you are going to have, if you know what I mean. It's what you might call anticipatory fun – like the smile that comes to you before you quite get the joke.

One of the deepest and most fun things to learn about when you're learning the art of fun is learning about the art of having fun with other people. It's an exponential thing – when you're having fun having fun with people who are having fun having fun with you. As it were. This is what games are for, and, coincidentally, so am I.

Every game is an opportunity to practice the art of fun. Every game we play, if we so desire, is an invitation to fun, and more fun, and deeper fun.

Enjoying my self

I enjoy my self enjoying the wind, the sun, the malted milk shake. I enjoy how I am, how I feel, how I act. I enjoy my self rapt, enraptured, wrapped in all of a moment's glories.

I enjoy how I am when I witness animals and children enjoying themselves, each other, the light, water. I enjoy how completely I can enjoy them enjoying a moment of the world so completely, so completely without me.

I enjoy how I am able to enjoy you. Just you. Even when you are enjoying something that has nothing to do with me. I enjoy knowing that I can enjoy your grace, beauty, laughter, clumsiness, playfulness, your person, your self, you.

I enjoy how we can enjoy each other's enjoyment, each so completely other, and yet completed by each other – me enjoying you enjoying me enjoying you.

I enjoy my self joined with yours as if my self were something that I am not, someone other, separate enough from me that I can enjoy it for what it is with you and does with you and enjoys with you. I enjoy my self like I enjoy yours.

Not having fun, or having not-fun

With the apparently unlimited opportunities for fun offered to us every moment, it is often puzzling that there are times when we actually choose not to have it. Fun is so, well, fun. Why, when we could so easily be having fun this very minute, would we choose to have anything else?

Sure, there are many, many things to be worried about, to be angry about, even – poverty, injustice, callousness, selfishness, greed, disease, the myriad of miseries. But none of those preclude fun. As so many people who have devoted so much of their lives and times to helping people attest to – the work, as hard and sobering as it can be, is most often fun of the greatest, deepest, and most profound ilk.

And yet, from time to time, we get grumpy. We get so grumpy that we reject rejoicing, deny delighting, and all but celebrate suffering.

The worse thing one can do when one feels the need to be grumpy is to deny the grump – privately or publicly. The best, not only to acknowledge it (again both privately and publicly), but to embrace it. Letting people know that you are feeling grumpy helps them give you the space you need to wallow, and gives them the permission to acknowledge the existence of the not-yet-fun in their own lives and loves. Letting your self and the world-at-hand make it more fun.

Just as the easiest way to have fun is to start with the things that are already fun, the easiest way to develop the art of making things fun is to start with things that are meant to be fun in the first place. Since games and toys are purportedly for that very purpose, they are the best tools to use in your exploration of fun-making.

A next step would be to make games from things that aren't meant to be either games or toys. For example, you can make a game you know out of things that really have nothing to do with that game.

Then there's making games out of things that aren't games at all. This is close to the ultimate way to create fun, generally engaged in by those who find themselves on what I seem to be calling a playful path. For an especially tasty example, there's dessert-sharing, which is actually a game-like, playful thing friends and families might do together at a restaurant, ordering a bunch of different desserts, and then giving each other tastes, as requested. Which could lead one almost inexorably to the aforementioned game of Dessert Roulette.

The fun threshold

Let's once more consider two different funonema.

We'll call one "major" and the other "minor."

Major fun is, well, major Fun that is so much fun that we are willing to risk life and limb to taste it, even if only for a second. It's the fun of sky diving, bungee jumping, rock climbing, snow boarding.

Minor fun is the chewing gum kind of fun, even the washing dishes kind of fun that comes with the warm water and emerging sparkle and the meditation-like expanse of timelessness that ends when the sink is empty.

The problem is that it's the major kinds of fun that get all the press. That's the kind of fun that soft drink commercials are made of. The other, the ordinary kind of fun goes for the most part unnoticed, barely felt.

Which is precisely why so many of us think that we aren't having fun. Which is precisely why so many of us really aren't having fun – because even when we are, we think we're not, if you know what I mean.

So all the commercial dollars that go into making it perfectly clear how this car or these shoes or those sunglasses lead inevitably to the ultimate expression of all-consumingly major fun – leave us, for the most part, in the shadows of despair, feeling that everything else we do is dreary, funless.

Which has the effect of raising the fun threshold to the point that hardly anything ever feels fun enough. Which is fine for the commercial powers, but not so good for us, the fun-seeking many, who buy and buy in to the belief that minor fun is not fun enough to be considered fun at all.

So we need to take back the fun that we are given on a daily basis: the fun of crunchy cereal, of cold milk and hot coffee, of birdsong and dog wag, of smiles and waves, of warm blankets and light reading, of bringing someone breakfast in bed, of holding someone, of being held. The fun of loving anything, of caring about anything, of caring for, of helping, of healing.

We can start with making a list, an enumeration, of the things we do for no reason. The things we do for fun. The things that give us pleasure. The pleasures we give and get. The slight things that bring us moments of light. Sure, we can include the big things, the major

ones. In fact, bringing the minor together with the major enriches our understanding of both, our embrace of all.