

When I was in seminary, I chose to do my required hospital chaplaincy internship during the school year, rather than the summer intensive chaplaincy training that most students choose.

And the reason was not for any logistical school credit reason, or anything like that.

It was because I wanted to go to the UU summer camp I began working at in college.

I got some funny looks about it. The looks that implied that summer camp was not “grown up” enough for someone in grad school, looks that implied that it wasn’t a serious enough thing to do with my summer, looks that subtly and not so subtly made me feel like I had to defend my decision.

When I explained this to my chaplaincy supervisor, (who, incidentally, was both Nathan and Otto’s chaplaincy supervisor), as well as why I loved working at camp so much, he told me that “I had the most serious theology of play he had ever heard”.

And I think that might be an accurate statement. And if there’s anything that I’ve learned in preparing for this sermon this week, it’s that play among adults is seriously stigmatized, and could use some re-branding.

So that summer, like so many other summers, I went camp in part because I love working with young people, in part because the woods are so beautiful, in part because I love the values-based community that we create, and in part because one of the most powerful ways that we create that values-base community is by playing together.

At this particular camp, there are no required programs, it’s not materials-intensive, it’s got a lake that’s a mile walk down the road. We spend our days in workshops and playshops and made-up runaround games and in the evenings we have chapel services and check in with our cabins. And besides eating meals, the most important agenda we have for our two weeks together is building an inclusive and loving community that walks that fine line between individualism and interdependence.

My experience at camp has been that our play together during the day makes chapel and check in deeper, and vice versa—when we are playing together it’s deeper because we’ve had time to hear about one another’s days and lives.

Time moves in a funny way at camp, too, lots of people say. We call it the “Rowezone”—the camp is called “Rowe”—and we notice that each day feels like a week and each week feels like a day. I come back from camp each year simultaneously exhausted and rejuvenated.

So I came back from camp *this* summer wondering how to incorporate some of the things I love about camp in to the rest of my life, how to bring camp home. How to relax and play more, to be outside more, to be in that deep flow of time more often.

I did some digging in to the research behind play, and there is a TON of it. Did you know that there is a National Institute for Play? There is. It’s that important!

There are lots of types of play— social play, object play, narrative storytelling play, imaginative play, body play and movement, creative play... yet all types of play seem to have a few common threads—that play is done voluntarily and self-directed, play is an activity where the means are more valued than the ends, it is somehow removed from “real” or “serious” life, play is intrinsically motivated, and is done for it’s own sake, and it involves an active, alert, non-stressed frame of mind.

It is well known at this point that play is critical to children’s development, and that across species animals engage in play behavior as a way of exploring boundaries and building trust.

Children in our society usually have permission to play, while adults often don’t.

But it’s also critical to adult’s well-being and mental health, too. The need for play in fact does not actually go down as humans develop and grow older—the only thing that changes is the social pressure, the structure of our lives, and the stigma against adults playing.

Moments of play are not necessarily all-or-nothing—play can blend with other motives or attitudes, which is not uncommon in adults in particular. Pure play occurs more often in children than in adults, which is part of why we talk about children “playing” but adults being “playful” attitudes to adult responsibilities.

But play is so good for you! Play can relieve stress by releasing endorphins, it can improve brain function and ease depression, it can stimulate the imagination, making problem solving easier, and it can improve your relationships with partners, children, co-workers, community members.

Play within relationships is critical to the health of those relationships. Play builds trust and safety, develops and improves social skills, teaches cooperation. People who have play deprivation not only are not much fun to be around, but lack of play has been pointed to as a significant contributing factor in causes of violence.

So science has shown play is critical to the social and emotional health of people of all ages, but I would say it is also critical to our spiritual health, as well.

If you are like me then perhaps you’ve had the experience of engaging in unstructured play directed by very small children. The kind of “here, you be this...difficult to follow character and I’ll be this character I love from TV...seemingly unrelated storyline follows...” and you repeat. Over. And. Over. And Over.

And if you are like me then perhaps you’ve had that feeling of wondering when the interminable play will end, or sifting through to-do lists in the back of your mind or wondering about strategies for transitioning play time to lunch time with minimal tears. Has this ever happened to you?

But if you are like me then you might also have had moments within that when time starts to move differently, when you realize an hour has gone by somehow, where you’ve given yourself over to the play and become fully—and joyfully—present in it.

I use this example because this pattern – the resistance, the “is this really all we are doing?” the “I have so many other things to do” and the eventual shifting in to the present moment—this pattern is not unlike how I engage in some spiritual practices.

The focus of play is on the experience, not on any particular goal or productivity. A time to be rather than do, to experience rather than produce. Play is, in a way, a practice of Sabbath.

In play we enter in to sacred time. And in that sacred time, our emphasis shifts to the experience of time as an unearned gift, as grace. We put down calendars and check our phones and emails less or not at all and don't have to rush off to the next thing right away. On Sabbath, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jewish theologian, writes,

“The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

Sabbath—and play-- allows us to creatively imagine a different world, as David Ramsey said in our earlier reading,

“Play says that the world doesn't have to be like this- the world doesn't have to be the way it is today- play says that the world can be bigger, smaller, scarier, safer, happier or sadder- it can be any of these things, or all of these at once, and infinitely more...

Play is shaping the world in the image of our dreams and fears, instead of allowing the world to shape our lives...

In play we are able to take ‘the world as it is’ and create ‘the world as it could be’”

Play builds a bridge between the world as it is and the world as it might be—it literally fills the gap between the two, and isn't that what religion is about on some level—about the living we do in between the facts of birth and death, about living with the gap between the world as it is and the world that our hearts know is possible?

When was the last time you played, really played? When was the last time you felt 50% playful, or 75% playful?

This fall at church we see the beginning of our church's newly formed Fellowship team, whose mission is to provide opportunities for the church to deepen opportunities for connection among the church. One of the ways we've talked about doing this is by playing together more, having more opportunities to gather together for that chance to *be* together, rather than *do* together, because we know that play and fellowship and Sabbath time helps our relationships in community as much as they do one-on-one.

So let's play. Let's keep on playing and know it's real depth and capacity for transformation, or let's play more, in our families and as a church community. Let's remove the stigma from adults playing, because we've got science on our side.

If you don't know where to start, host a game night, go bowling, learn a joke, learn a magic trick, play with children, do a puzzle, throw a ball for a dog.

Rest assured that you aren't wasting time, you are investing in your well-being. So play into more community, play into better and deeper relationships, play into the grace and gift of time, play into the world as it might be, play into creativity play into your own best self.

May it be so, and Amen.