

Playing for Real
A Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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Last week we honored the life and legacy of Pete Seeger. You know – around the face of his banjo, Seeger had these words painted: This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender. And, truly, with determination and yet lightness of heart his banjo carried the voice of love from small groups of rail hopping men to thousands of people gathered to sing, chant, and witness for peace and for justice and to be agents of hope. Through his music I learned the value of singing courage into our bones, of lifting ourselves with hope and light hearts, I learned that a crowd of people singing of determination, vision, and hope, generate a tremendous amount of power. At a protest once, Seeger was reported to have visited with the opposing protestors on the other side of the street. When he returned he said “They always have more flags, but our signs are more fun”

Today’s sermon is about the power and primacy of play – of how much we need it and how much it can do for us.

We can’t always press our noses to the grindstone or fatigue and despair will overtake us. We need times of play for life to feel worth while— and we need those times of play because play is at the root of who we are. In recent years our schools have suffered from a decreasing amount of play – even the youngest children seem to have their days occupied with learning to the next test. But educators know that a great bulk of children’s learning comes through play: experimenting by pretending, playing with various materials in the environment, negotiating relationships and making friends. If you’ve ever sat with a small child eating cheerios you know that the act of picking up a cheerio – or tasting, or throwing it on the floor, or pushing it around the table – is part play to learn dexterity, about gravity and its consequences, about parents and their limits. Children play to learn. Play takes us beyond routine and into the arena of experiment and surprise. There is no routine for children. Life – our world – is unpredictable – games of peekaboo or of hide and seek just help us learn to thrive in the midst of this surprising reality.

This week Sheryl Bass and a few other people sent me an article from Slate.com by Peter McGraw and Joel Warner. It was about the fact that animals – particularly our closest relatives – chimps and bonobos seem to laugh like humans do – when they find something funny. In the article they wrote: “Scientists believe human laughter evolved from the distinctive panting emitted by our great-ape relatives during rough and tumble play; that panting functions as a signal that the play is all in good fun and nobody’s about to tear anybody else’s throat out. In a clever bit of scientific detective work, psychologist Marina Davila-Ross of the University of Portsmouth analyzed digital recordings of tickle-induced panting from chimps, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans, as well as human laughter, and found the vocal similarities between the species matched their evolutionary relationships. The passage continues...

Nonhuman primates don’t just laugh—there’s evidence they can crack their

own jokes. Koko, a gorilla in Woodside, Calif., who has learned more than 2,000 words and 1,000 American Sign Language signs, has been known to play with different meanings of the same word. When she was asked, "What can you think of that's hard?" the gorilla signed, "rock" and "work." She also once tied her trainer's shoelaces together and signed, "chase."

So play is written into intelligence and, just as Diane Ackerman was talking about in the quote from earlier, play is fundamental to evolution.

It's how we learn, how we relax, how we test our environment ... and it's how we connect. My Dad and I used to play cards for hours. When the family from Mark's side gets together, his mother, Megan, pops out a deck of Quiddler cards and a crowd in a wide range of ages gathers to play – kidding, goading, gloating, and loving every minute. When opponents come up with brilliant words and trounce us – we get a strange delight in acting miffed, while secretly enjoying their show of smarts. Off in another corner – depending upon the size of the gathering, a game of settlers of Cataan or bridge may start up and stretch into the wee hours – accompanied by the same teasing and aggrieved noises.

We love to play. Even, sometimes, against our better judgment. When I got my first computer back in 1996 it came with, of course, solitaire – something I'd played for years with actual cards. The computer also came with a game called Power Pete, in which a muscular avatar rescued helpless bunnies from evil toys and fought his way from level to level. It was a rather annoying yet addictive game and I got weird satisfaction from each level I mastered, though I was fairly embarrassed at "wasting my time" on it at all. Still I couldn't stop until I reached the highest level. An accomplishment about which no one actually cared – including myself.

Some years later, I got on facebook and a friend of mine – whom I blame to this day, urged me to play a game called Farmtown. It was a game in which one's tiny, though giant headed, avatar could walk around, put up buildings, plant, tend, and harvest crops and flowers, and tend livestock. But the best part of Farmtown was that the avatar could really communicate. You could type in anything you wanted –within the bounds of decency. You could visit the farms of other players and have real conversations. I made new friends – a couple in Australia, the Philippines and – one in particular – a transplanted French Canadian living in Missouri. Our politics were quite different but, still, we had a great time talking religion, politics, family, and pets. We took care of each other's farms if one of us went out of town and she helped me remember and practice a bit of my high school French. But gradually, the few friends that I had who played the game migrated to Farmville. I confess that I joined them for a while – but the graphics were unattractive to me and – beyond the fact that nothing that I was doing was real – I was planting and tending imaginary crops and building imaginary buildings – on top of that the lack of real conversation made it all seem pointless and I wandered off, relieved that I could stop feeling that sense of nagging guilt at what I perceived as wasting time.

Then, last year, I got turned on to an old TED talk by Jane McGonigal. I was skeptical as I tuned in. She began by saying that every week world-wide online gaming takes up about 3 billion hours of human time. I felt a wave of disgust. I was ready to stop watching when she suggested that we should be spending more and

not less time on line. Remember a few weeks ago, I talked about how people are purchasing robots to spend time with shut in family members, with the elderly. We're vanishing from one another's lives and leaving robots and avatars to take our places. McGonigal wasn't winning me over – and when she talked about how, in contrast with the vivid life to be found in online worlds, reality is rather broken – I thought – well, she's a game designer – I know just who to point the blame for the paling of reality -- game designers.

She wrote in her book, *Reality is Broken*, the truth is this: in today's society, computer and video games are fulfilling genuine human needs that the real world is currently unable to satisfy. Games are providing rewards that reality is not. They are teaching, inspiring and engaging us in ways that reality is not. They are bringing us together in ways that reality is not." ... we "hunger for more and better engagement from the world around us... We are starving and our games are feeding us."

Well - I know I want something more meaningful than a game to be feeding our souls. But that's just what McGonigal is talking about. Games, particularly immersive games, engage people in four things and boost their human capacity for those things. The first is Urgent Optimism. The sense that the challenge ahead is winnable – of course in a game it is winnable – otherwise no one would play it. The sense of urgent optimism is enough to drive gamers from level to level. Of course the opposite of urgent optimism is despair – something we can see in abundance around us in the real world. In games – we realize that a failure in one moment may, in fact, lead us to the success of the next moment. In life, we are more often made to feel shame and inadequacy when we fail – and that is precisely how we lose our sense of play.

The second quality is that gamers and games build a strong social fabric. It turns out – as my family seems to know – that we like people better after we have played a game with them. First we have to trust them to enter the game – but once we are in the throes of playing we discover that we have a common ground and that builds deeper trust and that deeper trust, in turn, builds stronger social relationships.

The third quality is Blissful productivity. There is always a challenge to be faced in a game and in online gaming as one challenge is surmounted another appears, making the game harder and harder, and so we turn to the next challenge with enthusiasm – because, it turns out, we derive more joy from living at the edge of our potential than from staying in our comfort zone. Playing a challenging game is more fulfilling than lounging around or watching tv. Interesting huh? It's as though we evolved with a passion to keep evolving. Part of the bliss comes from playing at that edge – where the gamer can feel him or herself growing, stretching.

And the last quality that she talks about is epic meaning. An individual playing a game is engaged in a story of epic meaning – huge meaning – a hero's journey, a quest. Entering the game connects the gamer to something much larger than him or herself. And, in games that are strong in connection, the sense of epic meaning is reinforced by the other gamers. Much as, when we finish another Quiddler game and someone wins by a landslide – the losers pretend to be both beaten down and full of praise for the victor.

All told what these four qualities produce are what McGonigal calls super

empowered hopeful individuals. And because of that Jane McGonigal and others have created games that address problems in the real world – because we need more super empowered hopeful individuals and because super empowered hopeful individuals are willing to engage a challenge and see it through.

The games accomplish two things – they help people innovate and to share innovations to address real world problems – and the other is that they move people from despair, paralysis, or complacency to hope and action. McGonigal has a vision – she says: Instead of providing gamers with better and more immersive alternatives to reality, I want all of us to be responsible for providing the world at large with a better and more immersive reality. I want gaming to be something that everybody does, because they understand that games can be a real solution to problems and a real source of happiness. I want games to be something everybody learns how to design and develop, because they understand that games are a real platform for change and getting things done. And I want families, schools, companies, industries, cities, countries, and the whole world to come together to play them, because we're finally making games that tackle real dilemmas and improve real lives."

McGonigal experienced the positive possibilities of gaming when she suffered a debilitating concussion. Her recovery was slower than slow and she was profoundly depressed. She couldn't use the computer and was stymied by her lack of progress and decided to invent a game that might help her heal more quickly. She named the game SuperBetter and, by the way, it has been turned into an app you can download on your phone or tablet. But when McGonigal created it – it just depended upon having her friends check in with her, keep track of accomplishments, small, mostly. For those accomplishments she would receive points, energy packs, and bonuses for larger accomplishments. Suddenly her recovery was exponentially faster. A game used for healing, for increasing well-being. The game created a strong supportive community, increased her resilience, and provided a template for future world-improving games.

It's a provocative vision and it helps me understand why she wishes that the 3 billion hours per week of online gaming was doubled or more by people playing these games that transform the gamers and the world. For a while, I tried a game called WeTopia, in which every point you make and every significant accomplishment translates to vaccinations delivered, water purified, and schools equipped. The game lacked some of the key characteristics that make for a truly epic game – as does Disney's Club Penguin, which offers character building opportunities for kids. WeTopia seemed to accomplish some good deeds, but right now – we need more than good deeds.

Yesterday, at what was a truly successful and inspiring Climate Change Seminar put together by members of this congregation and including people from all over the greater Chicago area, Dan Huntsha quoted Winston Churchill, who said, "The truth is incontrovertible. Malice may attack it, ignorance may deride it, but in the end, there it is."

There it is – and here we are – in our hot, crowded, fractious world. We don't need to throw up our hands in despair. And we are here in challenging lives – facing stresses and hardship, many of us, that we never really imagined that we would. But

victory is within reach. We need to remember that superpowers – world saving superpowers are just within our reach.

Gamers, Jane McGonigal said, are super empowered hopeful individuals. So, I ask – isn't that what you'd like to be? It's what I want to be. I mean – not just while playing a game – but in life all the time? When I see the sort of burn out, over stressing that runs through our society I remember that what we need is not to throw up our hands, but looking squarely at the truth, we need to turn to what is real, and to reach for one another's hands, talents, visions, and partnership and to remember that we have all that we need – not to make the world or our lives according to a fantasy – but we have all we need to sustain life on earth, redeem some of the future, find joy in our daily lives, discover a powerful social fabric, the skills, technologies, and human resources to save the world – just like any strong, massive, shared game – we will have the tools we need at every level – if we just remember that we are all – despite appearances – connected. We aren't playing solitaire – but save the world. And we can win – we can experience what Jane McGonigal calls Fiero – it's the release of endorphins when we triumph over adversity. Fiero is what you feel when you have faced an epic story and had an epic win – you can't have that feeling without those conditions.

Well – we are facing many epic stories and also the one that we share. And, in a world where we are all connected anything is possible. It's possible that we can play creative games that generate new saving solutions – it's even more possible that we can face our individual lives and our collective destiny with the spirit of entering an epic story and having a massive community to work with – to play with side by side. What is most possible is that, together, we have all the bonus packs, all the power packs, all the lifelines, all the maps, and all the partners to have a truly epic win.

We all need an inner music as well as outer music – we need not gritty determination – but a sense of discovery, freedom, purpose, and play -- something that allows us to surround hate or despair and force them to surrender so that we may create together the epic win that is so needed.

All we need to do is reclaim the lightness of heart, the faith in our ability to keep learning and evolving, our confidence in our connection, and the sense of fearless discovery we were all born to ... and press “play”.