

AWAKENING PLAYFULNESS

“Connecting deeper with God through the practice of playfulness”

by Karen McKie

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The practice of playfulness is one that is largely overlooked in our Christian tradition. I wish to explore playfulness as a meaningful practice to enrich in our lives and those of our directees.

“In our culture today, doing something without purpose is considered a waste of time.”¹ The spiritual director is privileged to offer a safe space where the directee can be honest with themselves and before God. To consider the invitation to unproductive playing, to being with God, rather than always doing things for Him.



I will look at some definitions and some of the benefits of playfulness. I will then consider how the Trinity exhibits playfulness as a model for us to learn from. We will encounter some of the hindrances to playfulness as a Spiritual practice, and finally the different play styles that we can grow in. The goal of this research project is twofold. To gently nudge us towards reawakening playfulness as a spiritual practice that will enrich our lives and the relationship with self, God, and others. And, to develop an attitude of playfulness in my own life and relationship with God as an antidote to my Enneagram 3, achiever self².

¹ Donald Garrett, “Faith and Values: Play as a Spiritual Practice,” “The Morning Call” (September 2015):5.

² Threes are defined by their desire to be significant and to distinguish themselves through their achievements. To others, threes appear confident, ambitious and goal orientated. They are unsure of their innate self-worth and look for validation through their accomplishments. <https://www.truity.com/enneagram/personality-type-3-achiever>. All enneagram types will benefit from exploring ways they can embrace a playful posture with God. The spiritual direction space offers opportunity to discover this.

“Play is the exuberant expression of our being. It is at the heart of our creativity, our sexuality, and our most carefree moments of devotion. It helps us live with absurdity, paradox, and mystery. It feeds our joy and wonder. It keeps our search for meaning down to earth.”³ This definition demonstrates how playful practice can enrich our relationship with mystery. God comes to us through mystery and surprises us with the extraordinary hidden within the ordinary moments of life. Having a playful attitude opens us up to notice what we notice and sense God’s presence in unexpected ways. The spirituality of play is an attitude to be reawakened in us all. This can be explored within spiritual direction, to offer directees permission to play and be open to a new way of being with God, as well as expanding our understanding of God’s character. Within the session, directees may be offered “playful” ways of working with spiritual material. Such as blowing bubbles as an expression of blowing away our concerns. Or using playdough to reflect upon the scripture (Isaiah 64 v8) being clay in the Potter’s hand. “The opposite of play is not work - the opposite of play is depression. Play helps us deal with difficulties, provides a sense of expansiveness, and is an essential part of the creative process.”⁴

As children we would have all played so naturally. It is the way that we interact with the world and learn how things work. Cognitive and physical development, language learning, assimilation of knowledge and relationships are all formed through child’s play. “Those children who do not get ample opportunities to play do not have the opportunities to make permanent neurological connections necessary for learning.”⁵ Likewise in adults lacking a playful practice may also limit our understanding of the joy and mystery of life. We may lack the “abundance of life” that Jesus speaks of in John 10 v 10. Play may appear to be apparently purposeless; it is enjoyed for its own sake. Play is voluntary and a cure for



³ www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/26/play. Fredric and Mary-Ann Brussat.

⁴ Brené Brown, *The gifts of imperfection* (Minnesota: Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 101.

⁵ www.kindyprincess.wordpress.com/play-based/learning.

boredom. When we are playing, we “lose a sense of the passage of time and stop worrying about whether we look good or awkward, smart, or stupid. We are fully in the moment.”⁶ A playful posture opens us up to our authentic selves and allows us to cast aside our masks and to be honest with ourselves and who God has made us to be. Remembering our childhood play forms will help us to reawaken parts of our adult selves that we may have hidden under our need to perform and to be productive. When we are playing, we are open to moments of serendipity, we may stumble upon new ways of doing things or new ways of being that expand our view of God, self, and the world. Our image of God may be broadened as we develop a playful practice. Play offers us a sense of freedom. John 8 v36 “If the son sets you free, you will be free indeed”. It awakens creativity and often promotes social interactions and deepens our relationships with others. “Play allows us to stay open and present to possibly overwhelming situations, giving us opportunity to find meaning in our darkest of times. To make the invisible visible.”⁷ Like prayer, laughter and play are holy things, play allows us space for our spirit to breathe and re-create. When we play and enjoy the fullness of life, when we don’t take ourselves too seriously, some would say that we are praying.⁸

DID JESUS PLAY?

Scripture tells us that “Jesus wept” John 11v35. But did Jesus’ play? Did he laugh, skip, joke, dance and have fun?

We read of Jesus dining with His friends and with tax collectors and sinners. He was a master of wordplay irony, and satire, often speaking with an element of



⁶ Stuart Brown, *Play, how it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*. (London: Penguin Books,2010),17.

⁷ Di Gammage, *Playful Awakening. Releasing the gift of play in your life*. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers,2017),46.

⁸ All it takes is to swap out one letter...pray/play!

humour that gets lost in translation in our modern context⁹. Jesus was often invited to parties¹⁰ because people enjoyed his company, crowds thronged around Him, and his fiercest critics accused Him of being a party animal!¹¹ Christ laughed, and we are made in His image. I wonder if as a carpenter, he enjoyed making things simply for the fun of it. Maybe he made toys for children, spinning tops or toy animals? Did Jesus rough and tumble with his



siblings growing up? Did He play an instrument? Did Jesus play with the animals, throwing a stick for a dog, or playing with a kitten? Was He a sportsman who enjoyed a game of tag with the disciples? Did He walk on water only once, or did he enjoy this for fun too? Maybe this was the precursor to surfing? Did Jesus enjoy sitting around a bonfire telling jokes and enjoying fresh food with his friends? Did he always walk between towns, or did he jog and skip, run and jump? Did He sit back and marvel at the wonderful creation that He made as He watched the sun rise in the morning? It could be a new discovery for us and our directees to think about Jesus this way. Scripture does not give us all the details, but we can use our ‘holy imaginations’ to picture Jesus enjoying his days on this earth. “I think the promise from Jesus that the burden is easy and light, seeks to reassure us that rigid and humourless religion is not His way. If God is not juice and joy, then



what has created all these lilacs and lilies?”¹²

Offering our directees a picture of Jesus laughing, or dancing may be a helpful way to tap into this aspect of God’s personality. This may challenge previously held views of God

⁹ Matthew 19 v 24 “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.”

¹⁰ Luke 5 v 33, Johns disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.

¹¹ Luke 7 V 34. The son of man came eating and drinking, and you say here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

¹² Richard Rohr, *The five promises of male initiation*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing,2020),154-155.

being dour and eternally serious. Encouraging our directees to spend time with the stories of Jesus in the company of His friends, in Lectio Divina mediation may break open a new awareness of His playful nature. Directees may be invited to write in their journals, dance before God or write poetry or a song to reflect upon their discoveries. To find playful ways to express themselves that suit their personalities.

Let us consider God the creator. Is He playful? I would invite directees to spend some time looking at creation, “God’s other book” for clues. For he made “green alligators and long-necked geese, humpty-back camels, and chimpanzees. Some cats, rats, and elephants...”¹³ Creation is alive with the fingerprints of God. He put the rainbow in the sky and made the lilies of the field. Matthew 6 v29 “not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.” The writer of Ecclesiastes 3 v 4 tells us “There is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.”

The Holy Spirit is ever present, wooing us and extending an invitation to be with Him. Unbidden God delights to surprise us with Himself. We are the ones



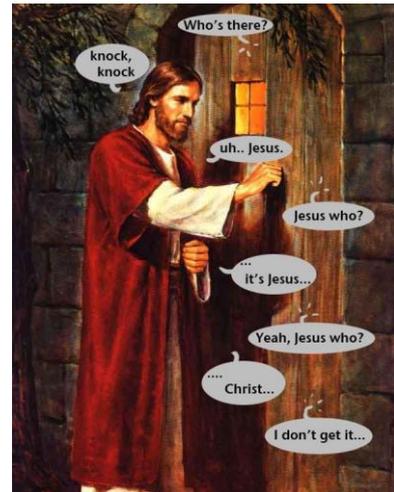
who have the joy in responding to this invitation. Revelation 3 v 20 “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door, I will come in and eat with them and they with me.” God will never force Himself upon us. It is not play if it is forced! Playfulness is always voluntary, and God is always waiting for us to respond to Him. This builds relationship as we become more aware of the ways in which God is beckoning us to notice Him and to delight in Him. “For the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”¹⁴ Jesus encourages his followers to “come to Him as little children” Matthew 18 v 3. For children play in free abandonment and trust. Reawakening a playful posture before God allows us to remove our

¹³ The Irish Rovers, The unicorn 1968.

¹⁴ www.goodreads.com/quotes/697596.

masks of productivity, respectability, and self-sufficiency and learn to enjoy Him forever!! The way we view God will affect our ability to reawaken playfulness as a spiritual practice.

The use of fun illustrations like this may also be helpful with our directees to ignite a different response to Christ's invitation!



When did we stop skipping?

I know I skipped and did cartwheels, made huts, danced, sang, and laughed until my cheeks hurt when I was a child. But when did it all stop? What hinders us from playing as adults? "Spiritual people do not play! For one thing they are just too serious to ever play."¹⁵ This view is prevailing in some corners of the Church.



God is not opposed to the natural life and all its pleasures. He is the one who made us and designed us to laugh and to have fun! That our joy shall be full¹⁶. "It demands a sense of wonder. With that sense we are born, but as we grow older, most of us lose it. We get blasé and worldly-wise and sophisticated. We no longer run our fingers through water, water is H₂O. We've grown up."¹⁷

¹⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the disciplines*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 79.

¹⁶ John 15 v 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

¹⁷ Burghardt, Walter J, *Contemplation: A long loving look at the real*. (Church, Winter 1989).



I sent out a questionnaire on playfulness as spiritual practice¹⁸ the results regarding what hinders playfulness are interesting. Workaholism and the concept that our self-image is tied to our productivity are strong factors that quash our playfulness. “Long list of to-dos that seem more

important.”¹⁹ I would play more if I had more gaps in my schedule, maybe I need to schedule more gaps!²⁰

Play seems to be a waste of time it is not goal-orientated or measurable. “It is hard to justify especially if others around me are busy or working for a purpose.”²¹ We do not give ourselves permission to play, it seems selfish. We are too busy to play, we have more important things to do. “I worry

about what others will think of me.”²² The tyranny of the urgent and not having enough time. “I feel like I can’t play until I get stuff done like study or if my house is messy.”²³ Does this indicate that we are unable to trust God to keep the world spinning if we take some time out to play? “Possibly I take life too seriously.”²⁴

Recovering from illness or travelling the hard road of grief also limits our capacity for play. “My fatigue and energy levels and motivation hinder me from playing.”²⁵ The concept of being open to an attitude of playfulness rather than structured time to play is another consideration. “I think as adults we forget how to play.”²⁶ The image we have of God also effects our ability to hold a playful posture. “My perception of policeman God.”²⁷ Not having the ideas of how to play or not



¹⁸ Special Interest topic. Playfulness as Spiritual Practice Questionnaire June 2022.

Questionnaires were sent to the SDFP 2022 cohort, friends/family members and congregational members of my local church, Knox Presbyterian, Fitzroy, New Plymouth, also to the local SGM database. Thirty-nine replies were received from an age-range 19-84 years of mixed genders.

¹⁹ SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments

²⁰ SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments

²¹ SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments.

²² SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments.

²³ SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments.

²⁴ SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments.

²⁵ SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments.

²⁶ SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments.

²⁷ SIP Questionnaire, participant’s comments.

having anyone around me to play with. “I am more likely to give myself permission to play when I am with children or playful friends.”²⁸ All of these factors can hinder us from living the abundant and joy filled life that God delights to give us. Even alongside life’s challenges there is an invitation to dance, laugh and to be surprised by God. “The best name for God is surprise!”²⁹

“It is fun to have fun, but you have to know how”³⁰

Divinity invites us to play, to dance to get outside of ourselves and join the other world that we knew as children. “Let your imagination loose to play with ideas-what it means to be alive, to be in love, to believe and to hope.”³¹ Reawakening playfulness!! But how? Play will look different for all of us, depending on our personalities, our age and life stage. This is part of the fun of Spiritual direction, to be able to be alongside our directee as they reawaken the part of themselves that wants to play! Dr Stuart Brown outlines different play personalities. He has “observed that most people have a dominant mode of play.”³² I have simplified these play styles and present them as a poster for directees to refer to in spiritual direction sessions or when attending a day retreat.

²⁸ SIP Questionnaire, participants comments.

²⁹ Benedictine Stendl-Rast

³⁰ Dr Seuss, *The Cat in the hat*. (New York: Random House Publishing,1969.).7.

³¹ Burghardt, Walter J, *Contemplation: A long loving look at the real*. (Church, Winter 1989).

³² Brown, Stuart. *Play How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*,65-70.

The eight play styles are:

Movement and body play

Dancing, swimming, jumping, surfing, walking, skipping, cycling, twirling, running

Musical play

Singing, listening to music, playing music, writing music, listening to birdsong or waves crashing

Creative/Artistic Play

Painting, redecorating, sewing, woodworking, cooking, building, crafts, drawing, pottery

Imaginative Play

Storytelling, photography, movie watching, theatre, musicals, dress ups, gaming.

Nature Play

Bird watching, gardening, nature walks, beachcombing, walking the dog, skimming stones, kicking up leaves, making a daisy chain

Social Play

Board games, sports, meals together playing with children or grandchildren

WORD PLAY

Poetry, Storytelling, Joke telling, Song writing, Reading, Crossword puzzles

Observational play

Watching a sunrise or sunset, watching children hearing their laughter, seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary, laughing at yourself watching animals at play

In spiritual direction we are looking for play practices that open up the directee. What fills them with joy and peace? This is where the movement of God is. The 'aha' moments that we so often speak of. Permission-giving is a large component of the director's role, to help the person overcome the barriers that are identified. It may help to assist the directee to remember what they enjoyed doing as a child. This will give an indication of their preference for play. This in turn leads us to God. "I love walking my dogs and I see the joy in their wagging tails. These



are lovely creatures made by the creator who enables me to freely walk with them and reminds me of the mystery and wonder of the earth in which we live."³³ This is an example of nature and body play. "Levity brings perspective to my sense of self and the world. It helps me sense that I am delighted in by God, even



when I am not doing anything productive."³⁴ Encouraging your directee to notice God at play is a lovely practice to facilitate. "Watching God at play helps me to appreciate the enormity of my God and how great His grace is that He should love such an insignificant mortal as me."³⁵ Surfing leads me to a deeper

relationship with God because you are in His creation, I feel a lot closer to Him. Also being able to do it in community deepens your relationships with others, and you can talk to people about God in the surf too."³⁶ "Playfulness opens a space where God is free to speak. It removes pre-thought expectations and gives room for emergence."³⁷ I recall dancing on my daddy's feet as a little girl



³³ SIP Questionnaire, participants comments
³⁴ SIP Questionnaire, participants comments.
³⁵ SIP Questionnaire, participants comments.
³⁶ SIP Questionnaire, participants comments.
³⁷ SIP Questionnaire participants comments.

to the song “Pearly Shells.” This playful memory awakened in me the delightful feeling of being held, safe and delighted in by my earthly Father, this in turn gave me a window into how my heavenly Father delights in dancing with me too.

Christ is at play everywhere and in everyone. For God is in us all. The discipline for us to develop is to recognise Him. “For Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his. To the father, through the features of men’s faces.”³⁸



As a spiritual practice playfulness is already present within us. The challenge is to reawaken this part of us, that may be lying dormant or be shut down by the myriad of life’s challenges. To inject more playfulness into our lives, requires us to respond to the invitation of the Holy Spirit at work. To slow down and notice that “God is looking for someone to play with throughout the day is a good starting point.”³⁹ The discipline of being in the present moment requires cultivating in us, because that is where God is and where play happens. Our spiritual direction sessions are times set aside where playful practises can be rediscovered with some gentle prompting by the director.⁴⁰

Reawakening playfulness in ourselves and encouraging this in our directees, is a life-giving spiritual practice. Many in the church feel “tired and burnt-out on religion”⁴¹ and if we are to respond to the invitation of God to find “rest for our souls” this practice is one to cultivate. After years of ministry alongside my husband, I feel invited into a season of useless beauty and unproductive playing! None of this appears outwardly productive but is deeply restorative to my soul. As we give ourselves permission to play, we are then able to offer this same grace to others.

³⁸ *As Kingfishers catch fire*, a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Cited in Eugene H Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 2017) 3.

³⁹ SIP Questionnaire, participants comments.

⁴⁰ See appendix of ideas for retreat day, and everyday life.

⁴¹ Matthew 11 v 28-30 The Message paraphrase.

Reawakening playfulness positions us to delight in God and to experience His delight in us. This is an ongoing invitation to move from doing to being and to experience life in abundance!



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Appendix:

Special Interest topic:

Playfulness as a Spiritual Practice:

Questionnaire:

1. Do you give yourself permission to play?
If not, what hinders you from playing?
2. How did you play as a child?
3. How do you play now?
4. How do you notice God at play?
5. How does your play/playfulness lead you to a deeper relationship with God?
6. How could you inject more play/playfulness into your life?

Ideas to inject playfulness into a retreat day or individually:

1. Reflect on the image of Jesus eating with his friends/playing with children/dancing. Put yourself into the picture. How does this relate to your previous image of God?
2. Sit with an image of Jesus eating with his friends, imagine the sights/sounds/tastes. Use your creative imagination and see what God might say to you.
3. Reflect on how you played as a child and how you felt. Imagine Jesus being there and playing with you.
4. Reflect on Ecclesiastes 3 v4. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance. Ask God to show you what time it is for you. How to laugh and dance again?
5. Embody the play experience. Dance/twirl/fly a kite/skip/let a scarf fly in the wind as you wear it.
6. Music: Sing/write a song/play an instrument. Use song lyrics as a prayer.

7. Taste: savour the pleasure and fun of preparing and eating a meal and give thanks for our sense of taste.
8. Nature: Notice the playfulness of the Piwakawaka (fantail) in the trees, play with a kitten, watch a dog running for a stick on the beach. Notice and enjoy spring lambs jumping.
9. Write a poem or a psalm playfully use rhymes and rhythm. Offer this to God as worship.
10. Find a friend to laugh with. Look back at old photos or make new memories!
11. Decorate your home/church for fun to inject life into the season. Not only at Christmas time. A green dinner for St Patricks day/ A red dinner for Valentines day/ Dress up theme just for fun, a BBQ in the middle of winter
12. Watch the sunset or sunrise/or a funny movie. Stop striving and be present.
13. Take photos of things that you find funny in everyday life.
14. Dress up in fun clothes.....no more black! (Unless watching the All Blacks!)
15. Make a sandcastle/play with Lego or playdough. Make a fun cake for a party/ take a swim in the ocean in your undies!
16. Play with a child if you need an excuse to have fun and be silly, borrow a child if you need to.
17. Plant flowers in your garden and add little fun surprises into your garden to remember not to take yourself too seriously (maybe a friendly garden gnome!)
18. Listen to the sounds of laughter around you at work or when you are in the community. Stop and enjoy this. Notice what has sparked the laughter, it is contagious.
19. Read poetry that has playful turns of phrase (Dr Seuss children's books are a treat!)
20. Infuse play into the everyday, don't wait for holidays or weekends.
21. Visit a playground, watch the children at play and join in. Jump onto the swing, relax, and enjoy. Remember that all ground is a playground.
22. Blow up balloons and play with them. Feel the breath enter the balloon and give thanks for the breath that God gives us daily. Bat the balloons around the group and listen to the sounds of laughter as you play together. Make balloon animals/hats/flowers.

23. Play on a see-saw with a friend and reflect on life's ups and downs together. Play and pray with what comes to you.

24. Reflect on Psalm 139 while knitting. Make each row a prayer.