

Play of Light

Play is a universal word. Its meanings are many, and varied. One sense of “play”, which is closest to its deepest etymological roots, is the play of water, or the play of light. The flashing entanglement between pattern and chaos found in splashing water is delightful. When light plays across the landscape, we are moved to notice our planet's vibrancy.

The surprising interaction between pattern and chaos is at the core of each and every sense of the word play. The essence of the universe itself also seems to be an interaction between patterns and chaos, and I find the universe to be quite surprising! Think of the light of our sun playing across the dust and ice of Saturn's rings. Think of the playful geysers of Saturn's icy moon, Encelidus, fountaining water up into the vacuum of space. These are two breathtaking natural wonders around *just one* of our solar system's worlds. Now imagine for a moment the thousands of thousands of thousands of thousands of thousands of thousands of suns in our universe, their light playing out across an unimaginably immense diversity of natural wonders. What, among all of these majestic natural phenomena, could be more surprising than life, more surprising than the organization of matter and energy into a form capable of contemplating the surprise of *being*.

When playing a game, there are rules which provide enough structure to create a shared experience among the players, while allowing for some amount of surprise in the course of play. It might be interesting for you to learn that a common pastime for young people today is to watch other people play video games online. I ask you this, is that really more strange than watching athletes play in a sports match? It is the shared understanding of the activity's structure which brings us a sense of belonging, and the surprise of unknowable outcomes which provides us with a sense of anticipation and excitement. Millions of people watch professional poker online as well.

Observing others at play can be enlightening. It is my distinct privilege to have worked at playland in the YMCA, and to have monitored recess for many years at Meadowlark Elementary. The structure of a playground game is quite different from a card game or a sports match. Some games of tag have specific rules, but often children

play in a way where no one child could precisely define the rules of the game, but all are acting organically with a shared understanding of the game's structure, however full of surprises it might be. In a game of tag, when the slowest person has been tagged as "it", a faster student will slyly let themselves be tagged to reinvigorate the game, this works best when a shared sense of trust and belonging suffuses the group dynamic. It is understood that an ongoing, shared sense of fun is the desired result of play.

Playing music upon instruments, or performing a play in the theater are similar in that there is a structure followed by the players, but spontaneity in the live enactment of the art. Even songs played upon the radio interjects themselves into our livespace in ways that comfort us with their familiarity, but that we also find surprising in the intricacy and genius of their composition.

Think of our local performing arts scene here in Sheridan. In the majority of the productions, the performers are volunteers. Even in the case of student performances, most are not bound for Broadway. Just as with softball and bowling leagues, not to mention the endless rounds of golf, people's play demonstrates an excess of energy that our culture contains and channels. My view is that play is an indictment of the underlying assumption of capitalism's primacy in our lives and activities. The importance of these playful behaviors implies a set of more fundamental cultural values that have nothing to do with the economics of production and survival. I believe this is the case because the dynamics of structure and chaos found within play more closely align with the fundamental structure of the universe than does any transactional economic system.

My best argument for the play being inherent in nature is that fact that we see it take place in the animal world. We have all seen dogs, dolphins, otters, and calves at play, and although you might not be surprised to know that birds often play, what might be more surprising is that play has been observed among crocodiles, turtles, fish, octopuses, and even bumblebees! Play is defined by the researchers making these observations as behaviors where animals who are not under stress repeatedly undertake activities without receiving extrinsic reward. It's also noted that they seem to be enjoying themselves.

The bridge from animal play back to the fundamental nature of reality might seem wide, but I want to return to the theory of abiogenesis, the proposal that life

emerged here on earth amidst the complex interplay of chemicals within the earth's crust. We can think of these chemical soups as play in several ways. As I was defining play, there is structure, and there is surprise - the chemicals followed regular and consistent "rules" as they underwent reactions, but the surprise came when the emergent property of self replication arose among broth of phospholipids and amino acids. In the sense that play is the repeated activity without any extrinsic reward, I feel that not just the chemical processes giving rise to life, but all of the universe itself fits the definition. Active physical processes carry on repeatedly, and if we set aside our egotistical belief that all of space and time is unfolding for the benefit of this one particular species of primate, then perhaps we can see that the playfulness in the universe is not meant for anything. Play is done for the sake of play, just so our reality is. For us, rather than this fact leaving the universe devoid of meaning, it leaves *us* with the opportunity to partake in the joy of being. We can be aware that we might not fully understand the rules of the game, but the purpose of our part in it is to keep an ongoing sense of surprise and enjoyment going for everyone playing along.

Notes from Seth Schwaiger:

Some unorganized, off the cuff, (playful?) thoughts.

I'm interested in how play relates to paradigm shift and creativity. Play is a necessary component of advancement and the bedrock of creation, though it is subservient to neither.

Play is sacred and mystery blooms within it. It is pointless and the point. Why it causes joy is never perfectly clear.

Evolution is a great example.

You hint at altruism arising from play as well which I find very compelling. In the children's game, a speedier child chooses to be tagged in order for the fun to continue. The fun is the socially held attribute which is a good contrast to capital, a privately held quality. Altruism serves the other. The group is inherently more the other than the self. Many children quickly learn that they cannot own the fun. "My toys" mentality always leads to disappointment and tears. Play is not explicitly social but it, I think, always extends beyond the self and us connection driven. I wonder if it isn't an aspect in neural path formation as well on the cellular level. Dendrites reaching out for connection and feedback. Just a guess! Altruism arising from play also lends credence to its sacredness.

Then again being “played” is pretty far from altruism.

I’m thinking about all those videos of animals on trampolines.

Role play is another tangent. It’s connection to empathy and the construction of identity has fascinated me as well. Deity incarnations is a funny form of role playing. I wonder if this could be a personal tie in for you, though maybe that would be incongruent with the style of sermon/talk you’ve been developing. 3rd person?

Is there something within quantum probabilities that could be described through the lens of play?? Maybe God does *play* dice??

Is there a tie in with the term “god’s children?” Is that construction universal across religions?