

# Playing with Fire

- *Discovering deep playfulness*

## SETTING THE SCENE

### Question

“What is play?” “What is the link between play and creativity and what can it teach us about being creative?”

### Aims of the session

- To explore the concepts of play and playfulness and their significance
- To explore the idea of God as a playful God and to encourage playfulness in our lives

### Knowledge and Understanding

- To gain some knowledge of the importance of play in human development
- To play contributes to us being creative people
- To understand the significance of play in our own lives (both positive and negative) and how we can harness and develop it
- To understand specifically the power of play in relationship building

### Skills and Abilities

- To analyse the playfulness of their lives
- To begin to release more playfulness in themselves and others

## PLAYING WITH IDEAS

### Playful questions

‘What words do you associate with play?’  
‘What images and pictures come to mind when you think about play?’

‘What is play?’

## A PLAYFUL GOD

### Spontaneous delight

The very word ‘play’ conjures up a sense of spontaneous joy and delight, which lies at the heart of the biblical picture of God creating. God who says to Job about the work of creation:



‘... when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy’  
(Job 38:7)

The Hebrew word *sachaq*, usually translated ‘play’, has the sense ‘delight, laughter, singing and dancing’; the Greek word *paizo* comes from the idea, ‘to act in a childlike way’.<sup>1</sup>

Israelites would ‘play’ in worship, which on occasions is described as ‘sporting and dancing’ to music that the musicians played.<sup>2</sup> The whole image is of free uninhibited childlike abandon, nothing ritual or choreographed here; this is play!

Looking into the future the prophets see playfulness at the heart of a restored community:

‘... the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets’ (Zec 8:5)

Isaiah sees breastfeeding babies playing in perfect safety at the edge of a snake-pit!<sup>3</sup>

So to play in an authentically biblical way is to live and laugh, sing and dance with childlike abandon energised by a fire of passion from God.

### God at play

While God’s playfulness darts and dances like dappled light and tantalising shadows around the biblical text, often more sensed than stated, it is however there to be seen most clearly within, and in relationship with, the natural world:

‘For the mountains yield food ... where all the wild animals play’ (Job 40:20)

The theme continues wonderfully ...

‘O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all,  
the earth is full of your creatures.  
Yonder is the sea great and wide,  
creeping things innumerable are there,  
living things both great and small ...  
and Leviathan<sup>4</sup> that you have formed to play (with) it’<sup>5</sup>  
(Ps 104:24-26)

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth exploration of the biblical ideas behind the language of ‘play’ see the article by G Bertram *paizo* in G Kittel (Ed) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol V 1967 Eerdmans 625-630

<sup>2</sup> Cf Ex 32:6 (also 1Cor 10:8) we shall make further reference to this passage below; also 2Sam 6:5, 14-15; 1Chr 13:8

<sup>3</sup> Isa 11:8

<sup>4</sup> The ancient Hebrews were not at ease with the sea, it was a place of power, mystery and possible malevolence, it was a place where only God could move easily. It was also a place of great creatures that took on mythical proportions often referred to as ‘Behemoth’ and ‘Leviathan’ (see Job 40:15 - 41:34). They are usually understood as a hippopotamus and a crocodile respectively. Here Leviathan is probably to be understood as a whale

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew is certainly open to the possible understanding of God playing with the sea (and land animal) creatures; see LC Allen *‘Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 101-150’* Word Publishing 1987 28 note 26c



This image of God at play with great sea creatures in the chaotic environment of the oceans is simple spectacular, God both participating and enjoying it! The image of the huge humpbacked whale leaping into the air comes to mind.

The same mood calls to mind the words of the WW1 padre-poet GA Studdert Kennedy, in his case speaking of wild roses:

‘... as though some elf  
Had painted them for fun, while God  
Looked on and laughed ...’<sup>6</sup>

The links between ‘wild’ and ‘child’ and ‘play’ are captivating!

There is just the sheer sense of delight within both the sensible and the seemingly absurd within creation; whether peaches or children, guinea pigs or tadpoles, the platypus and aardvark ...

‘And as for the duck, I think God must have smiled a bit  
Seeing those bright eyes blink on the day He fashioned it.  
And he’s probably laughing still at the sound that came out of its bill!’<sup>7</sup>

In Proverbs 8:30 there is another picture (referred to earlier) of playfulness and God, this time linked to the original work of creation with Wisdom personified as a playful child joyfully alongside:

‘... I was beside him like a child;<sup>8</sup> delighting him day after day,  
always at play in his presence, at play everywhere in his world,  
delighting to be with the human race’<sup>9</sup>

The picture of God in the divine workshop of the earth with wisdom as a child playfully enraptured and involved in everything that is happening; creativity as joyful and playful as it is awesome and serious!

## Shadows and flames

However, when you trace the language of ‘play’ though the biblical story, the delight also has a shadow. You soon discover, what we all know from personal experience, how very easily play can turn from make-believe to menace. The playground of the innocent can become the hunting ground of the bully.

The Hebrew *sachaq*, can turn so easily from ‘laughing’ to ‘mocking, from ‘having fun with’ to ‘making fun of’.<sup>10</sup> Exuberant joyful dancing can, if not careful, turn into self-indulgent reverie and worse.<sup>11</sup> The Greek *paizo* can turn from ‘childlike’ to ‘childish’ in a trice with all the selfish and petulant undertones that brings. This dark side of play

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<sup>6</sup> See ‘Wild Rose Away’ GA Studdert Kennedy *‘The Unutterable Beauty’* Hodder 1964 p 45

<sup>7</sup> From a poem called ‘Ducks’ written by FW Harvey, an English poet, known for poems composed in prisoner-of-war camps at Krefeld and Gütersloh that were sent back to England, during World War I

<sup>8</sup> The stronger Hebrew reading is ‘a child’, the phrase ‘master-worker’, which is how the Hebrew is usually translated is more likely a later rabbinic tradition

<sup>9</sup> Prov 8:30-31 Jerusalem Bible rendering (slightly adapted for an inclusive reading)

<sup>10</sup> Cf Jg 16:25

<sup>11</sup> See Ex 32:6 cf 1Cor 10:8



is expressed in English culture with phrases like 'to play cat and mouse' or 'to toy with someone', potential cruelty lying behind the casual.

None of this diminishes the bright beacon of play, but it reminds us that we are dealing with what is a profound phenomena. Easily marginalised and restricted to the realm of infants, it is in fact core to being human, at the heart of creativity and linked to the very character and nature of God. Our title 'playing with fire' is so appropriate; like fire 'play' burns with unpredictable and glorious energy consuming all the possibilities and opportunities it can imagine, while at the same time it can get out of hand and leave a scorched trail behind it. Our playful God has put wisdom at the heart of play, which is itself playful and childlike, yet mature with gentle, peaceable, merciful goodness.<sup>12</sup> This should shape our exploration.

## **PLAY BACK**

'Recall a vivid childhood memory of play'  
Do you still play, if so how and why?  
Would you say play is lacking in your life?  
What benefits do you find in play?  
Do you feel you need play?  
What are the barriers to play in your life?

## **PLAY ATTENTION**

### **What's in a word?**

Play is an experience that is almost impossible to define, because it encompasses infinite variability, but which we all recognize when we see, or experience it.

Randomly hearing the word 'play' will probably prompt the image of a young child in carefree physical delight, alone or with others, or caught up in an imaginary world few can enter. On a second take, the word 'play' may picture an adult relaxed, at ease and happy, free from the constraints of work and social responsibilities. However beautiful and spontaneous they have led thinkers to study and analyse them for many years, with some valuable observations.

### **Child's play**

It is widely acknowledged that play is an important part of our development as children through to adulthood. For children play is essential for their physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual development. Play provides:

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<sup>12</sup> See James 3:13, 17-18



- An outlet for surplus energy<sup>13</sup>
- Opportunity for spontaneity and improvisation<sup>14</sup>
- Outlets for our emotions and places of escape<sup>15</sup>
- Skills for social interaction and creativity<sup>16</sup>
- The joys and trials of teamwork and competition<sup>17</sup>
- Our senses with stimulus<sup>18</sup> and exercise for our bodies and minds<sup>19</sup>
- Development of the senses, motor skills, logical and then abstract thinking<sup>20</sup>

## Pursuit of happiness

Play should flow seamlessly from childhood into the maturity of adulthood; it should span a person's complete lifetime. There can be little doubt, that whatever other benefits play might have for an adult, it helps maintain all the gains it worked to develop in childhood, and more.

One of the most common ways adults define play is to view it as the opposite of work. When we are not working, we are surely at play. However, in western societies, it has been observed that so often, 'playfulness has been replaced by aggressiveness and the feeling that more needs to be crammed into less time'<sup>21</sup> Leisure mirrors work; going to the gym is just a tread mill of a different kind without refreshment from a crammed daily economic schedule. Authentic playfulness does not need to perform. Play that carries a hidden agenda, to look good, young, healthy, and enables you to gain economic benefit is simply not play.

Play is about spontaneity and safe abandon. Play lifts stress from us. It refreshes us and recharges us. It restores our optimism. It changes our perspective, stimulating creativity. It renews our ability to accomplish the work of the world. Play appears to allow our brains to exercise their very flexibility.

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<sup>13</sup> A classical theory put forward by Spencer (1875) which has some clear wisdom in it, young bodies full of physical exuberance having space to simply be, without that opportunity there can be emotional frustration and eventual physical lethargy

<sup>14</sup> Erik Erikson (1955) believed that through play children dramatize the past, present and future and develop their identity

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud say play as a *catharsis* that allowed children to be rid of negative emotions and replace them with positive ones. Wehman and Abramson (1976) saw children learning to express their feelings through play

<sup>16</sup> Another classical theory called 'Pre-exercise' put forward by Groos (1898) suggests that children and animals practice skills they will need for later socialization or physical survival

<sup>17</sup> Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) a Soviet developmental psychologist believed that through play, children learn cultural mediation and how to internalize knowledge of their specific cultural groups and so function as a member of their society

<sup>18</sup> It is suggested by some neuro-scientists that play produces an emotional charge to spark chemical processes to help form strong memories

<sup>19</sup> The Arousal modulation theory suggest that human beings try to maintain an optimal level of central nervous system arousal through play

<sup>20</sup> These are the four child developmental stages, proposed by Jean Piaget (1896-1980) of the University of Geneva, which he believed that play stimulated and reinforced

<sup>21</sup> Anthropologist Garry Chik



It can truly be said that humans are made for play; after all, we are among the very few animals that play as adults. What the evidence adds up to is this: we are most human when we play, and just because we play.

## **PEACE PLAY**

### **Safe space**

Children will often play soldiers, but in real life conflict soldiers and other oppressors or attackers have found play disarming. In a pure state of play, defences crumble and people are no longer conscious of the self. When we laugh, fear melts away. The atmosphere of play enables people to connect directly with few prejudices. People look forward in a spirit of collaboration and conciliation. Former enemies come together to create a place to live in peace side-by-side.

Here is a fascinating true story from which there is much to learn ...

### **Husky and the polar bear**

On a late October day on the Canadian tundra next to a gray, cold but unfrozen Hudson Bay near tiny Churchill, Manitoba, it looked like a beautiful young Husky named Hudson was about to become one dead dog. The black, gray and white male belonged to hunter/trapper Brian Ladoon's 40-dog pack. Hudson was comfortably lounging on a fresh bed of snow, tethered on a long chain.

Suddenly, out of the nearly featureless, white horizon, there appeared a twelve hundred pound wild male polar bear; a very hungry polar bear. Biologists had been tracking and recording the movements of this and other bears in the area with video and still cameras. They had observed that this particular bear and his companions had not eaten for nearly four months (not unusual) because ice had not yet formed on the bay, preventing it from being able to hunt its favourite prey, seals. Under such circumstances polar bears have been known to make do with a sled dog snack.

The biologists were stunned when Hudson and the polar bear did not fight a deadly battle. As the bear moved toward him, Hudson, who obviously had never been warned about hungry polar bears, didn't try to flee, bare his teeth, or howl in terror. Instead, Hudson wagged his tail, grinned a doggy grin, and crouched in a bow to the bear, signalling an invitation to play. To the amazement of the biologists, examination of the encounter photographs showed that the bear approached Hudson also signalling his intention to play with a characteristic loose walk, playfully inviting gestures and facial expressions.

Within seconds, the enormous bear and North America's luckiest dog were wrestling and cavorting in the snow in front of the cameras of the amazed scientists. At one point, the bear wrapped himself like a white wool comforter around the Husky in an embrace. They played until the polar bear collapsed in pleasurable exhaustion, at which point Hudson came over and gave him a friendly pat with his paw, just to make sure his new playmate was okay. The polar bear returned several times to play with



Hudson over the next few weeks, until the ice formed on the bay and he was able to hunt a hearty seal meal.

### ... what can we learn

It works with humans, too. Anyone who has ever tossed a Frisbee to a beloved dog knows that playfulness crosses species lines. What does this mean? For humans and others animals, play is a universal training course and language of trust. The belief that one is safe with another being or in any situation is formed over time during regular play. Trust is the basis of intimacy, cooperation, creativity, successful work, and more.

Play therapist Fred Donaldson has developed many of his successful healing techniques by first deciphering the play signals of animals through close observation, then using the them to join in and play-bond with animals such as wolves and grizzly bears in the wild. He has adapted these techniques to his remarkable work with hostile gangs, warring political parties and other groups locked in lose-lose battles. He also works with mentally and physically disabled children to help them reach the freedom and utter joy found in deep play.

Kids have society's permission to play, and adults don't. Somewhere between childhood and adulthood, most of us exchange play for work, and forget to play with the abandon and joy of childhood. Giving adults the "go ahead" to play will have multiple benefits. For example, imagine how negotiations between opposing nations could improve if each side made the effort to learn the other's play signals, and play together.

This happened at the end of a frustrating summit conference between Prime Minister Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan. The summit had ended badly with the frustrating failure to reach agreement on nuclear disarmament. Despite everything, Reagan insisted on having a final "goodbye" breakfast with Gorbachev. The President began the meal by telling bawdy American jokes, which were reciprocated by raunchy Russian stories from Gorbachev and his staff, to everyone's delight and amusement. No business was discussed at all. Surprisingly, the summit was resumed by mutual agreement, and was ultimately very successful. The principle Reagan used is the magic of mutual play. It works between nations, co-workers, spouses, family members, friends, neighbours, and of course, pets.

The creativity of play is also a powerful force for deep emotional healing as we shall discover in our next session 'Rhythmic Wholeness'.

## PLAYTIME

### Play Quotes:

"Play is a wonderful human endeavor. In some activities, like flying kites, people are there simply to enjoy the experience. Competitive play gives us the chance to face an opponent and rise to a challenge. Team sports let us work with others and contribute to the common goal. Play is appreciated in all cultures and whether it's an Olympics



event or a neighborhood ball game, play offers us a way to experience the beauty of life with people we enjoy.”

### *Let's Play for Peace*

“Games unite people together. Through games, children get health education, skills and development. The most important thing is that children get to know each other. They build a foundation of peace. Even when they go back to their own country, they will still be friends.”

*Mzaliwa Salima*

### **Reading and Resources**

R Alter '***The Art of Biblical Narrative***' Basic Books 1983

E de Bono '***Serious Creativity***' HarperCollins 1995

C Booker '***The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories***' Continuum 2004

J Cameron '***The Artist's Way***' Pan Books 1995

J Cameron '***The Vein of Gold***' Pan Books 1997

M Csikszentmihalyi '***Creativity***' Harper Perennial 1997

JE Davies (Ed) '***Stories of Change: narrative and social movements***' State University of New York 2002

NM Jackson (Ed) '***Right to Dance***' Banff Centre Press 2004

A Koestler '***The Act of Creation***' Picador 1975

C Seerveld '***Rainbows for the Fallen World***' Stride Publications 1988

