

When Work Is Play

A Sermon Delivered on September 8, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Work and play are words used to describe the same thing
under differing conditions.”*

-- Mark Twain

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Call to Worship: by Elizabeth Strong:

Today we celebrate a dream awakening.
Today we worship with renewed hope in our hearts.
Today we act on an audacity of hopes and dreams for the future.
Today we begin the hard work for justice, equity and compassion in all human relations,
for today is a day like no other and it is ours to shape with vision and action.
Let us worship together and celebrate a dream awakening.

First Reading: Our first reading is about “work.” It’s a poem by Marge Piercy entitled
“To Be of Use”

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.

Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Second Reading: Our second reading is about “play.” It’s by Bernard de Koven from *The Playful Path* (p. 34)

You don’t have to play to be playful. You don’t need toys or games or joke books. But you do have to be open, vulnerable, you do have to let go.

Playfulness is all about being vulnerable, responsive, yielding to the moment. You might not be playing, but you are willing to play, at the drop of a hat, the bounce of a ball, the glance of a toddler, the wag of a tail. You are open to any opportunity. You are loose, Responsive. Present.

You have to be present to enjoy the sunrise, to delight in the light of your child’s delight, because otherwise you simply aren’t there to catch it. It goes by you as if it and you aren’t even there.

Playfulness means presence, but not just presence... Presence and responsiveness, lightness and attentiveness, improvisation and creativity, a willingness to let go and become part.

There’s nothing hard about being playful. The hard thing is let your self out to play so that you have that choice, the hard thing is recognizing the opportunity, the brave thing is accepting the invitation.

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When I was in my early twenties, I had a perfectly clear understanding of what work is, good work, real work. This was before I was ordained and gainfully employed as a UU minister. At the time, I was living in Germany, and my work was for the simple purpose of paying the rent. The local post office was my place of employment, where I worked swing shifts all day, into the evening and through the night, throwing sacks of mail in and out of trains and heavy metal carts, and emptying mailbags onto conveyer belts, where my colleagues and I would then take turns picking up packets of envelopes wrapped in string, organized and labeled by zip code, and then tossing them into other mailbags, across the room, each of them assigned a different destination.

Work began when I arrived at my locker, put on my uniform, which consisted of blue overalls, a blue jacket, and black steel-toed boots. Work was over when after an eight-hour shift, I changed into my own clothes, and headed home. “Feierabend,” which literally translates as “evening celebration,” is what the end of the shift was called, no matter the time of day.

I remember my favorite Feierabend was after a long night-shift, around 6:00 or 7:00 a.m., riding my bike home, just as the streets of the city were starting to wake up, and the first morning commuters were trudging off to their work places. I got a charge being wide awake, with my day’s duties done, while everyone else seemed sleepy, grudgingly trudging to their jobs. It felt great to be finished, having earned not only money, but also well-deserved rest and relaxation, and free time to play.

Work, as I understood it, is confined to particular places – whether the post office or the factory floor. There were employers and employees, bosses and co-workers, there were timesheets to keep and clearly defined tasks to accomplish. But I also had a hunch that there is more to work than that.

Going to theological school and earning a degree was work. Keeping my apartment clean, doing the dishes, going shopping all felt like work to me. On the one hand work was a laundry list of all the things I “had” to do, on the other were the things I “liked” to do. Work was about duty and drudgery, as opposed to the pleasures of play.

But – truth be told – I liked working at the postal service. I enjoyed tossing around mail bags. I had fun honing my eye-hand coordination, pitching mail packages. I enjoyed commiserating with my co-workers, and goofing around. And I felt real satisfaction at the end of my shift, and savored the sense of a job well-done.

And even though it wasn’t glamorous work, it did feel meaningful to me. People do need their mail delivered. And I helped make that happen.

One word for “work” in German is “Beruf.” It is closely related to the verb “rufen,” which means to call. The meaning of the work we do, our most meaningful work, is our calling.

* * *

What is work? The philosopher Joanne Ciulla says,

“Throughout history some have praised it, others have cursed it, but few have escaped it or had the luxury of deciding whether they should work or not. At one time or another we all wish that we didn’t have to work. We fantasize about catching up on chores or hobbies, spending more time with family, friends, or a loved one, reading great books, and traveling. Lotteries seduce with the vision of freedom from work and material need, yet a surprisingly large number of lottery winners and other independently wealthy individuals continue to work. It is easy to imagine not working for a short time; the task of imagining a whole life without work is more difficult.” (*The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*, p. 3)

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You know, there’s a story of a man who died and found himself in a beautiful, [heavenly] place, surrounded by every conceivable comfort. A white-jacketed [attendant] came to him and said, “You may have anything you choose - any food - any pleasure - any kind of entertainment.”

The man was delighted, and for days he sampled all the delicacies and experiences of which he had dreamed on earth. But one day he grew tired of all this. “I need something to do. What kind of work can you give me?”

The attendant sadly shook [her] head and replied, “I’m sorry, sir. That’s the one thing we can’t do for you. There is no work here for you.”

To which the man answered, “That’s a fine thing. I might as well be in hell.”

The attendant said softly, “Where do you think you are?” (Margaret Stevens, from *Prosperity is God’s Idea*)

* * *

Bernard de Koven spent most of his life working on play. His interest was sparked in his twenties, when he was working for the Philadelphia school district. He developed a curriculum for elementary school children designed to help them learn social skills by playing games together.

In the early 1970s, he, along with several colleagues, conducted an interesting experiment with elementary school children. The researchers put groups of twenty-some children in an empty room. The only things in the room were three piles of scrap wooden boards and recycled computer paper and a big mirror.

They asked the kids: “Could you build a city out of this stuff?” and then added, “we’ll come back in a while and see what you made.” Now, the children they were testing had spent a couple of hours a week over the past months playing games together, games like hide-and-seek, duck-duck-goose, or tag. They had control groups of children from the same school class that hadn’t played together.

After fifteen minutes, the researchers came back. And the differences between the various groups were striking: the children who had not played together spent most of their time defending their respective piles of junk, trying to steal or grab junk from other kids’ piles – even though it was just junk. They spent more time fighting than building.

The kids who had practice playing together quickly started out dividing themselves into groups around each junk pile. Soon they were all building streets and houses, apartments and playgrounds out of the scrap paper and assorted pieces of ply wood . And then they built roadways between the various little cities, creating one big metropolis.

According to the researchers, the experiment provided conclusive proof that kids who play together, work together better.

De Koven’s work in the early seventies was the beginning of a life-long career devoted to play. He is so devoted to his playful path, you might say, he practices play religiously. The way he describes it is: “A joke here, a bit of playfulness there, a wave, a doodle, a dance. Basically, whenever I notice an opportunity to do something a little, tiny bit playfully, I take it.”

We say, ours is a religion, which like sunshine goes everywhere, its temple, all space. He says, whatever path you happen to be on at any given time can be taken in a playful way: “You’re walking down a street. It’s the same street you’ve walked down before. It’s not like you have to find a different street. But this time, you walk a little more playfully. You step on cracks. You walk around a tree, twice. You wave at a bird.”

Or you jump into a pile and leaves, or you giggle in the grass. Or you toss packets of mail around a room, or whistle a happy tune, riding your bike home in the cool morning air at the crack of dawn.

Bernard de Koven is a life-long practitioner of play, an expert. He is a “guru of glee,” as he puts it. But still, he needs to remind himself, again and again, in the course of his busy days, to slow down, lighten up, and simply be playful.

* * *

The Christian theologian Michael Yaconelli says, “Play is an expression of God's presence in the world; one clear sign of God's absence in society is the absence of playfulness and laughter. Play is not an escape; it is the way to release the life-smothering grip of busyness, stress, and anxiety.” (from *Dangerous Wonder*)

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We live in anxious times. Many of us are busy. Many of us are stressed. And many of us work really hard. We work hard for justice, equity and peace. We work hard for the good causes we care about. We work hard for the people we love. Each of us in our own way, each of us using our unique gifts, each of us pursuing our distinct calling.

We jump into our work head first. We harness ourselves to our heavy carts and pull like water buffalo. We work side by side in a common rhythm, sharing the work of the world, as common as mud

And because we work so hard, it is easy to forget, that sometimes the hardest thing to do is let ourselves out to play. And we need to remind ourselves, again and again, that we have a choice. Sometimes the hardest thing is to recognize the opportunities we have – this very moment – to be fully present, to be vulnerable, open to our dreams awakening.

May we dare to do the brave thing
And accept the invitation
To work and play together.
May we welcome the opportunities we are given every day
to do work that is real.
And may be reminded, again and again,
that what we do here together is holy work.

So be it. Amen.