

The Playful Human Being

by

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Translated by Anniken Mitchell

Children have lost the capacity to play. They only want to be entertained. How often we hear this expressed. Parents and teachers are concerned with this phenomenon. They are asking if the time for playing is past. Yes, what is truly the nature of play, and what is the life-long importance of the play of the child?

Our neighbors to the east are going to learn to play! Last autumn the Swedes instituted the first official “Play Weekend.” The Swedes’ movement for play was completing a two-year project focussed on the importance of play for learning. They established a “Play Weekend” for the entire nation. “Arrangements for Play in Sweden” was held on the first weekend in September. The premise behind the project was that play develops fantasy, creativity, and empathy, and that children at play will develop a richer adult life. According to the *Dagblade*, the largest newspaper in Sweden, they hoped to sell a hundred thousand red clown noses before the Play Weekend which was modeled after the event of “Comic Relief day” in England.

Play and Work

Society’s understanding of the playful human has changed radically in the modern time. According to the well-known British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), the industrial revolution led to changing the independent thinking, life-enjoying and will-strong human into a disciplined and dependent worker. With James Watts and James Hargrave’s inventions the character of work was totally changed. From certain perspectives this brought many advantages, but in terms of the place of play in society, this development was also detrimental. Children’s play was deeply effected. Many children and young people got jobs in factories and in the mines.

The playful relationship to life is first established in the phase of life before puberty when habits are most easily established. From an anthroposophical, pedagogical, perspective, this is the leading theme between the ages of seven and fourteen, a stage in life where memory and habits are seen in conjunction with

the individualizing of the life forces in the child. This gives a pedagogical possibility to actively work to establish good habits. The creation of habits in the school-age child suffered severely as a result of the industrial revolution. Even the church supported this development to a certain extent. Ministers preached that dreamy children without proper work could more easily fall under the influence of demonic forces. This implied that free time and enjoyment were sources for evil, a perspective that is still prevalent to a certain degree. Everything was arranged to be conducive for man to work as much as possible.

Back to James Watt, whom all Waldorf students hear about in the ninth grade. As a young boy James was sickly and needed a lot of care; he exhibited an unusual sensitivity. He avoided robust boy play, and was often teased at school, so he ended up spending the larger part of his days at home in bed rather than at the school desk. He could be in bed with a headache for several weeks. His mother had a deep understanding for the boy, and had the courage to protect him against family and friends who had the perspective that he was lazy and needed a good beating. However, the father, a carpenter, did shout, “Look, my child is occupied and busy!” He had provided his son with toys that could be put together and taken apart, so the young James would work with these toys for hours. “At his age it’s important to have toys between the hands, not work,” the father admonished. In that respect one has to say that the playful human truly changed the world. The principle of metamorphosis is an important one in every biography, as well as in every pedagogical effort. Then Watt left his childhood home to go out and learn the art of clock making. His sensitive fingers and peaceful demeanor came in handy. He carried two things in his knapsack: a necessary leather apron and the Bible. James was sickly all his life, but he survived all his relatives and friends, and with a deep religious belief to the very end. He could not understand the critical attitude towards the so-called useless play.

Play and Usefulness

In his book about the moral being (1887), Nietzsche talks about the sense of guilt that is created when the human being is engaged in something that is considered not useful. Today’s attitude towards the playful is first and foremost promoted by politicians whose primary thinking is economical and quantitative in nature. In pre-industrial society, the human being thought differently. After a round of games, useful work could be executed with renewed energy and effectiveness. This wholesome perspective made us capable of thinking up new solutions to problems. The kind of guilt that Nietzsche describes has to be actively countered if we are to establish truly a space for children’s play.

The Nature of Play

Play is much more than a physiological or psychological reflex activity. In its very nature it steps out over boundaries and far exceeds the immediate necessities of life, even though our understanding of play is very limited. This is expressed, among other things, in pedagogical training. The theories about play and its importance can be summarized as such:

1. Play is one effective way to get rid of excess energy. It was especially the philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who proposed this perspective. He thought that play had very little productive importance in itself.
2. Play means relaxation. Play is a kind of counter measure against the hurried state of our times.
3. The importance of children's play is that it also contains economic potential. Children's joy in play, combined with the family's capacity to buy, has created a large play market.

It is important and joyful to register that the Swedish authorities are starting to acknowledge the importance of play in the ever-increasing market-oriented, quantity-oriented society. What historically happened to adults' work has also happened towards children's play. That which once was recreational, as sports, music activities and such, have now more and more become professional and competitive activities. And when public budgets are tight, the first areas that get cut are drama, music, and other artistic activities.

Around the end of the nineteenth century and towards the World War I, there were many theories around the important connections between play and the later life of an adult. This perspective was in principle embraced by many new reformed pedagogical perspectives, as for instance the Montessori pedagogical philosophy that play is the work of the child and the Waldorf pedagogical perspective elaborating the importance of imagination, inner pictures, and fantasy as central aspects of children's play.

But these perspectives were not compatible with the current psychological findings being expressed by Freud and his followers.





Different Interpretations

For Freud it was the importance of instincts and the inner tensions that they created in the human that was the foundation for his psychological theories. Play was for him a way to get rid of damaging aspects of the personality. For Freud play meant a kind of security valve for social difficulties and it was a helpful process in integration. Play was, for instance, a way to learn how to lead and to be in competition. A dream, in Freud's perspective, is also a form of play. Play is a permissible way to express unacceptable feelings and wishes. Therefore many educators and therapists encouraged students to express and live out their frustrations in dramatic play. But is this truly real play? Play is a way to socialize. We can practice social relationships. During play a common togetherness and a common will-impulse are established, which we could characterize as a kind of joint intention. A child's personality is developed in response to the ever-changing relationships in the environment. In such a play the individual will show itself and is corrected by other children. The human characteristic is that we have a wish to exert influence on others. The social world means that we are also able to identify our own will-impulses with those of others. Then what we call a common social feeling of responsibility is developed.

John Locke was most likely the first to try raising school children through formalized play. Jean Paul was quite in disagreement with this way of moving forward. “I tremble,” he said, “When I think of an adult who is mixed into the delicate activities of childhood.”

Usually one would not intervene in the ethical individualizing which is made visible in the world of play, where a quiet, contemplative nature is brought together in corroboration with the world of the senses, the more active, willful side. Here one’s own will and the more social in the will-life is combined. The most important job of the adult is to protect the space where this creative free-play can be expressed, and to protect the child from the destructive influences from result-oriented and strictly useful-oriented society.

The Joy of Mastery and the Aesthetic Dimensions of Play

Play is one way to develop physical motor capacities. That the human being’s physical capacities go through stages in childhood, there is much agreement. All parents have followed carefully the first efforts of the child from crawling to walking to running and jumping and climbing. All of these are controlled, conscious movements, which are practiced and also contain different levels of difficulties in terms of having mastery over the body. A mastery gives a sense of pride and joy and increased self-confidence. These movements are formed out of a will impulse, and are different from the more instinctive movements that predominate during infancy and toddler-hood. As opposed to the more instinctive movements, these latter ones have to be practiced. In his book *On Skis over Greenland*, Fritjof Nansen is talking about the beauty and the joy that people can have when they watch a beautiful ski jump over the hill. Nansen is pointing out the dimension within the body and its movements which is an important one in all play—the aesthetic dimension where the rhythmical movement element is showing its deeper nature. We can recognize this from the antiquity and the first Olympic games, where it was more important to show the beautiful in relationship to the body’s capacity for free movements. This we also can see formalized in movement forms such as circle dances and circle games. In such a developmental dynamic, the children use all parts of the body—head, the breast part, and also the limbs—movement patterns.

In the beginning there are actually two types of movements. We could call the first movement more passive, in which the impulse is coming from the outside, for example, the movement of the cradle or the swing. The second type of movement comes from the inside, out of the human being’s own impulses, and has an active will impulse expressed in relationship to the possibilities of the

body. Today we can see that the first, the entertainment games, are totally dependent on the outer impulses, and therefore also on technical apparatus.

As a medium for education, play has a large and important function, among other reasons because the necessary physical mastery is a freeing experience from the loss of gravity. The light upwards-striving movement is connected with the gesture of stretching oneself upward, the actual main theme of education. One feels happy in this. The child is touched on the soul level. As Schiller expresses it, the child is freed from the heaviness of life. Play is not about entertainment, but about a deeper pedagogical principle: joy. The downward movements have another character. The little child screams when he or she falls down, but to be thrown into the air creates a delightful squeal.

The Imaginative Quality of Play and Its Importance for Memory

When we look quickly at the mental aspects of play, we will not get past the names of Herbert Spencer and Friedrich Schiller. Both noticed the joy, the practice and the will quality of healthy physical expression. These are the three main aspects to play. The first one is often forgotten—joy and the warmth of enjoyment—something that is of great importance in our time, when data games have invaded the playroom. The second is concerned with consciousness, and the unconscious imitation of essential movements. The third is the necessity of play as pure activity for the activity's own sake.

The way of thinking which is first and foremost concerned with the usefulness of human action looks upon play differently: Play is not there for its own sake but needs to be directed to activities that are useful. Such an attitude has a quantitative orientation and seeks a measurable result; the aesthetic, qualitative aspects of play are ignored. In the Waldorf pedagogical perspective, a huge importance is put on especially in the preschool years to understand the qualitative aspects of play, its own character and origin.

The simple fact that it is fun on a deeper level to play is difficult to explain. The joy reveals that play is more than a material reality. It is a spiritual activity which is based on the fact that the picture constantly changes. Play contains the imaginative creativity in relationship to the outer realities. The child is creating inner pictures in the activity of play. There is no doubt about the child's capacity to play, to let him- or herself into the imaginative world and the freely expressed will activity which needs to be protected from interfering outer stimuli. This inner world is the birthplace for the development of higher mental functions.

Rousseau felt that a lack of free play could lead to the negative development of intellectual capacities. In strong words Rousseau expresses that the child will develop to fixed conclusion and an unresponsive and rigid statue if the child is

not given the opportunity to play. Modern research on memory points out that play has within it capacities to recreate and recognize and then repeat again. The child naturally loves to create and to recreate repeatedly. The capacity to remember is totally dependent on this picture of repetition which in free play has the capacity to live deeply into something.

In the world of play the child is in a self-created world. Goethe writes in his notes under his work with Faust that play is an important connection with the shaping of ones own personal thoughts. Charles Dickens expressed similar thoughts in connection with his creation of David Copperfield. “This would not have been possible if I in childhood had not used much time alone under the wings of play.” Today many parents would have concerns if their child played alone for five hours a day at a stretch as Dickens did, but as Dickens remembers it he was never alone. Many invisible playmates took part in his world. These grew slowly into characters in his novels. Leo Tolstoy comments that all of Dickens’ characters from his novels had become his personal friends. Pablo Narudo says it this way, “In my house I have collected small and large toys which I cannot live without. The child who is not a playing child is not a child, but the adult who is never playing has also lost the child who lived in him, and whom he will miss very much. I have also built my house as a toy, and play in it from early in the morning until late at night.”

The Liberating and Musical Character of Play

Another quality that we are concerned with is the fact that play is a totally free and voluntary activity. That means that it carries within it the element of freedom. This form of freedom gives play its joyful character. Play is started and ended as needed. Here there are no obligations. In the world of play we are just devoted and carried away with joy. From a more traditional perspective, one might be tempted to say that play is the opposite of seriousness, but this is not true. Play is often very serious, but without the gravity of the serious.

Schiller’s thoughts about the playful human being are part of the foundation for the Waldorf school’s relationship to the importance of play. In his groundbreaking work about the aesthetic education of the human being (1795), Schiller tries to explain the central importance of the playful instinct in the human being. For him the human is deeply connected with the aesthetic and the aesthetic with the capacity of the sensory experience. In play our capacity for sensory experience is brought to a higher plane. It is expressed in a creative process of transformation of the sensory when the child is playing. Play leads to a deeper sense of insight for the child. One could say that all creative activity is some form of play. There is definitely a connection between art generally and the art of playing.

In English “to play” is often synonymous with the capacity to play music. Music and play are free expressive activities. Music steps out over the logical and the visible in some way similar to play. Aristotle points out how both play and music have a fundamental place in the pedagogical process. The free man of antiquity in the Greek society did not work but used much time to play music. It was an important component in the education of the soul. Music, play and dance belong to the art of mime and have a great significance for the development of character and for the aesthetic development. The goal of these activities is to awaken and to move feelings for the aesthetic. Plato understood play as an entranceway to creativity because it opened up the cosmic spiritual expression

Music lives in an atmosphere of joy. “To play is to rejoice,” Shakespeare expressed in one of his sonnets. Schiller points out in his *14th Letter* that an inborn play instinct (*spieltrieb*) influences the sculptural through, for instance, a spontaneous instinctive need to decorate. We have all experienced sitting in a boring meeting with pen in hand, and almost without conscious activity we find ourselves doodling and making forms on the paper in front of us. This unconscious will impulse can be compared with the child’s early need to express itself through play, It mirrors the hands and the soul-playful creativity without the need for a goal or a specific usefulness.

Music and Play

Compared to the conditions for play in our time, it is interesting that music has gained a more central place than earlier. Never before have so many people played or listened to music as now. The access to electronic music is, of course, part of the reason. However, concert houses around the world have never been so well attended as today. Much of the music which is played is the so-called popular music, a type of entertainment which first gained its place in the general culture at the end of the eighteenth century. The most interesting fact is that so many people view music as a life necessity. This means that music has a unique place among the arts just because it is experienced as personally enriching. No culture in the world lacks play or music, and in both these activities speak the language of humanity. They are fundamental in the creation of culture because they express a totality of the communication form. They develop increased awareness, wakefulness, and an elevated experience of being. Many people experience that when they are fully present at a classical concert when, together with many others, they are transported above and beyond the trivial aspects of the world, yet, at the same time, seem more in touch with life itself. This state of being is like nirvana, and not unlike how a satisfied infant or a playful school child might experience life. To listen to music implies temporarily pulling back

from the hustle and bustle of life. When the typical age for play comes to an end, it is important in a Waldorf school that music becomes a natural part of the educational experience, otherwise the student might disengage for periods, not pay attention.

Play and Life

Creativity is dependent both on conscious and unconscious mental processes. Nietzsche, Steiner, and Jung all emphasized this form of aesthetic experience which has been described, and they pointed out that play promotes a feeling for the innermost being of the individual. The enchantment of play has no material interest and elevates play to the sacred world of the child. This state continues to work into the everyday life after play is over.

On a deeper level I think there is a public consensus that we need

to protect a genuine culture of play. I think that this is the same around the world. There would be many who would join John Ruskin, “Play is necessary to give us a happy state of mind.” One thing is the necessary seriousness of existence; another is the immeasurable value of a playful attitude to life – both aspects are needed. To play is to change the world. In play fantasy, creativity, and empathy are stimulated. In this way play creates balance and peace in the world.



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Notes

1. Montessori, Maria. *The Absorbent Mind*, Delta, New York: 1967.
2. Neruda, Pablo. *Jeg bekende jeg har levet*, Rhodos, Copenhagen: 1974, p. 301.
3. Schiller, Friedrich. *Briefe über die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen*, 1795.

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