



## Readings



When we play, we sense no limitations. ...We immerse ourselves in the act of play. And we become free. Lenore Terr

Photo by James Wheeler on Pixabay

### 1. *Play as Transcendence*

by Rev. Jim Eller

...Play is a form of Unitarian Universalist transcendence. In play we lose ourselves and enter a kind of time out of time. When we play full on, we can fall out of regular time and enter time as defined by that play. We become lost in order to be found. It is what holidays can offer. It is a place to stretch and be stretched. It is like the ...family football games, or croquet on the lawn in my childhood. When one is playing, one is on a different time, no longer measured by the standard units of the larger society, but rather by the peculiar ones of the game in question. In the “serious” world it may be 11 a.m. on such and such a day, month and year. But in the universe in which one is playing it may be the third round, the fourth act, the allegro movement, or the second kiss. In playing, one steps out of one time into another.

Yes, to play is to be in the moment of joy and ecstasy with another and is a signal of transcendence. In play we escape the pain, the sorrow, the conflict of everyday life, and play becomes the center of our life. It can be a place of pure joy, which seems to reach beyond time for a moment or two.

Source: *Types of UU Transcendence* by Rev. Jim Eller

### 2. *The Play Deficit* by Peter Gray

When I was a child in the 1950s, my friends and I had two educations. We

# EXPLORATION

## Play

had school (which was not the big deal it is today), and we also had what I call a hunter-gatherer education. We played in mixed-age neighborhood groups almost every day after school, often until dark. We played all weekend and all summer long. We had time to explore in all sorts of ways, and also time to become bored and figure out how to overcome boredom, time to get into trouble and find our way out of it, time to daydream, time to immerse ourselves in hobbies, and time to read comics and whatever else we wanted to read rather than the books assigned to us. What I learned in my hunter-gatherer education has been far more valuable to my adult life than what I learned in school....

For more than 50 years now, we ... have been gradually reducing children's opportunities to play. ...Beginning around 1960 ..., adults began chipping away at that freedom by increasing the time that children had to spend at schoolwork and ...by reducing children's freedom to play on their own, even when they were out of school and not doing homework. Adult-directed sports for children began to replace 'pickup' games; adult-directed classes out of school began to replace hobbies; and parents' fears led them, ever more, to forbid children from going out to play with other kids, away from home, unsupervised. ...The effect, over the decades, has been a continuous and ultimately dramatic decline in children's opportunities to play and explore in their own chosen ways.

Source: <https://aeon.co/essays/children-today-are-suffering-a-severe-deficit-of-play>

### 3. *Play as Re-creation*

by Patrick Thomas Malone and Thomas Patrick

Play is any activity we engage in that has no intention and no goal. It is activity simply for the experience of being active and actively being. Seen as such,

we can easily understand how so little play occurs in our society. We are full of intentions and goals. Visiting fitness centers to get in shape, ...playing tennis to win the division championship are not ways of playing.

...We cannot force ourselves to play, nor can we coerce ourselves into engagement. ...Seeing and searching, whether by a physicist searching for a new particle or a child searching for a four-leaf clover, will be playful only if it is real. The true explorer is the playful wanderer, not the man on a mission. Play is always nonintentional.

...We forget that filling up leisure time, exhausting ourselves, and external risk-taking are not playing. Playing is re-creation, an experience of self.

...We are re-created each time we play. That is the true risk.... We risk change.... We risk being reborn. ...We risk our past to be here. We risk our future to be now.

Understanding that play is the fundamental learning context has tremendous implications for our educational system. Sadly, that system now seems very out of touch with learning as opposed to informing. All teaching that is not grounded in play simply informs. ... Informing ...becomes the re-experiencing of the previous learning. It becomes a confirming enhancement of what is already known.

...Unimpeded, all humans will play. And while playing we will learn.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/21217>

### 4. *Finite and Infinite Games*

*Finite and Infinite Games* is a 1986 book written by James Carse. It explores the concept of games and how they relate to various aspects of life.

Carse distinguished between finite games and infinite games. Finite games have defined rules and a clear beginning and end. The primary goal is to win.



Examples include sports, board games, and business negotiations.

By contrast, infinite games have no fixed rules or endpoints. The goal is to keep playing. Infinite games include life, relationships, and certain forms of art. In infinite games, the players are not competing against each other but are engaged in an ongoing process of exploration, discovery, creativity, and, sometimes, collaboration.

Many aspects of life can be seen through the lens of infinite games. Carse suggested that embracing the mindset of an infinite player can lead to a more fulfilling and meaningful life. This mindset consists of curiosity, openness, and a willingness to adapt to new situations. Infinite players are not concerned with winning or losing but with participating fully in the ever-evolving “game” of life.

Given this, we are encouraged to reexamine our understanding of competition, success, and pursuing goals by embracing an infinite mindset.

Source: Touchstones

## 5. *The Core of Contemplative Life* by Patricia Hampl

For moderns—for us—there is something illicit, it seems, about wasted time, the empty hours of contemplation when a thought unfurls, figures of speech budding and blossoming, articulation drifting like spent petals onto the dark table we all once gathered around to talk and talk, letting time get the better of us. Just taking our time, as we say. That is, letting time take us.

“Can you say,” I once inquired of a sixty-year-old cloistered nun who had lived (vibrantly, it seemed) from the age of nineteen in her monastery cell, “what the core of contemplative life is?”

“Leisure,” she said, without hesitation, her china blue eyes cheerfully steady on me. I suppose I expected her to say, “Prayer.” Or maybe “The search for God.” Or “Inner peace.” Inner

peace would have been good. One of the big-ticket items of spirituality.

She saw I didn’t see.

“It takes time to do this” she said finally.

Her “this” being the kind of work that requires abdication from time’s industrial purpose (doing things, getting things). By choosing leisure she had bid farewell to the fevered enterprise of “getting-and-spending” whereby, as the poet said, “we lay waste our powers.”

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/16407>

## 6. *Play is the Thing* by Peter Gray

Learning versus playing. That dichotomy seems natural.... Learning ...is what children do in school... Playing is ...a refreshing break from learning. .... Summer vacation is just a long recess.... But ...playing is learning. At play, children learn the most important of life's lessons ...that cannot be taught in school. To learn these lessons well, children need lots of play ...without interference from adults.

...Most play is social play. Social play is the academy for learning social skills.

The reason why play is such a powerful way to impart social skills is that it is voluntary. Players are always free to quit, and if they are unhappy, they will quit. Every player knows that, and so the goal, for every player who wants to keep the game going, is to satisfy his or her own needs and desires while also satisfying those of the other players, so they don't quit. Social play involves lots of negotiation and compromise. ...To have fun in social play you have to be assertive but not domineering; that's true for all of social life.

...The golden rule of social play is not ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ Rather, it’s something much more difficult: ‘Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.’ To do that, you have to get into other people’s minds and see from their points of view. Children practice that all the time in social play. The equality of play is not the equality of sameness. Rather, it is the equality that comes from respecting individual differences and treating each person’s needs and wishes as equally important.

Source: <https://aeon.co/essays/children-today-are-suffering-a-severe-deficit-of-play>

suffering-a-severe-deficit-of-play

## 7. *The Sheep* by Lewis Hyde

Playing in the lot behind the house one day when he was still a little boy, Neruda discovered a hole in a fence board. “I looked through the hole and saw a landscape like that behind our house, uncared for, and wild. I moved back a few steps, because I sensed vaguely that something was about to happen. All of a sudden, a hand appeared--a tiny hand of a boy about my own age. By the time I came close again, the hand was gone, and in its place, there was a marvelous white toy sheep.

“The sheep’s wool was faded. Its wheels had escaped. All of this only made it more authentic. I had never seen such a wonderful sheep. I looked back through the hole but the boy had disappeared. I went in the house and brought out a measure of my own: a pine cone, opened, full of odor and resin, which I adored. I set it down in the same spot and went off with the sheep.

“I never saw either the hand or the boy again. And I have never seen a sheep like that either. The toy I lost finally in a fire. But even now...whenever I pass a toyshop, I look furtively into the window. It’s no use. They don’t make sheep like that anymore.”

... “This small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me..., deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light.”

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=981>

## Wisdom Story

### Insults for Free

by the Christian Desert Fathers

The Christian Desert Fathers tell of a new student who was commanded by his master that for three years he must give money to everyone who insulted him. When this period of trial was over, the master said, “Now you can go to Alexandria and truly learn wisdom.” When the student entered Alexandria, he met a certain wise man whose way of teaching was to sit at the city gate insulting everyone who came and went. He naturally insulted the student also, who immediately burst out laughing. “Why

do you laugh when I insult you?" said the wise man. "Because," said the student, "for years I've been paying for this kind of thing, and now you give it to me for free!" "Enter the city," said the wise man. "It is all yours."

Source: Breath Sweeps Mind: A First Guide to Meditation Practice, edited by Jean Smith

## Snippets

"Unfortunately, in our society we tend to equate play with frivolity and irresponsibility. There certainly is play that is like that, but such play is usually a form of escape and disconnection from the world. True play, such as we see children engaging in, is the opposite: it takes them into the world in a way that honors imagination and the power of the moment to reveal new and unexpected things; it is an encounter that opens the door for emergence. It connects them with what is and with what might or could be. True play is a doorway into the future and into possibility and newness.... Play can be loving and wise; indeed, love and wisdom are at heart playful." *David Spangler*

"Joy—or something like it—must pervade the vast universe as a whole. The wheeling of planets around the sun, the rush of galaxies over the horizon of visible space and time, and the spin of electrons all seem like the joy we feel when we whirl around at the behest of natural forces—swinging, diving, riding a merry-go-round. These are not occasions of tension but of deep release, of equilibrium, of exciting vertigo. They are play—play is moving equilibrium, and in it joy wells up. Play is active joy."

*Robert Ellwood*

"When I think about becoming, I think about play and the iterative process that is our relationship to play. When we play, we are experiencing all sorts of emotions and movements and pleasure. We embrace the melody and harmony of play and even participate in its refrain: we want more! When we are engaged in this activity of play, we are in relationship with the process of becoming. When we are in the process of becoming, we have a chance not just to imagine a different way to be and

become but to have a felt sense of the power of our becoming. Through the process of play, we have this all."

*Robyn Henderson-Espinoza*

"Play connects us. Play heals. Play helps us learn. But in modern life, play is a forgotten art, a casualty of our test and work-obsessed culture that isolates us from what makes us human. TPL is an ode to play, written in a heartfelt romp that model's playfulness itself. Jed and Julie teach us that play isn't simply what we do; it's a mindset we hone, a skill that we sharpen, a habit that we build, and so much more. And whether we're looking to engage life or avoid burnout ourselves, it all begins with the relationship we explore with our own inner child." *Takeru Nagayoshi*

"For humans, play is a refuge from ordinary life, a sanctuary of the mind, where one is exempt from life's customs, methods, and decrees. Play always has a sacred place—some version of a playground—in which it happens. ...The world of play favors exuberance, license, abandon. Shenanigans are allowed, strategies can be tried, selves can be revised. In the self-enclosed world of play, there is no hunger. It is its own goal, which it reaches in a richly satisfying way. Play has its own etiquette, rituals and ceremonies, its own absolute rules. ...But play also has its own distinctive psychology. Above all, play requires freedom. One chooses to play. Play's rules may be enforced, but play is not like life's other dramas. It happens outside ordinary life, and it requires freedom. ...Make-believe is at the heart of play...." *Diane Ackerman*

"Look at children. Of course, they may quarrel, but generally speaking they do not harbor ill feelings as much or as long as adults do. Most adults have the advantage of education over children, but what is the use of an education if they show a big smile while hiding negative feelings deep inside? Children don't usually act in such a manner. If they feel angry with someone, they express it, and then it is finished. They can still play with that person the following day."

*Dalai Lama XIV*



Play is the work of the child.  
Maria Montessori

Photo by Design\_Miss\_C on Pixabay

"The way of play was a part of all religions. St. Paul proclaimed himself a 'fool for Christ.' Jews honor the Sabbath, that time to stop working and to take pleasure in life. Hindus say that the universe was created as *lila*, divine play.... Muslim Sufis teach through jokes about Mulla Nasrudin, a laughable sage/fool. Native Americans celebrate bawdy trickster-figures.... Buddhists practice meditative games of breathing, attention, and joyful presence. Zen teachers poke fun at dogma."

*Drew Leder*

"We play because we have an exuberance of spirits and energy, but we are also exuberant because we play. We seek to play not only because it is part of our evolutionary history, but because we know that more often than not it will bring pleasure.... Play is a vital facilitator, shaper, and motivator: it allows the pleasurable practice of improbable twists and turns in instinctive behaviors which, in turn, creates for the animal a wider range of possibilities for future actions." *Kay Redfield Jamison*

"Play is essential to maturity. It gives us pleasure, a sense of accomplishment, of belonging. It is an opportunity for learning. It reduces our stresses. It even inspires an occasional book.... Play is important to our relationships. And it gives us flexibility. As Robert Fagen has put it, "In a world continuously presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares [us] for an evolving planet." *Lenore Terr*

"The spirit of deep play is central to the life of each person, and also to society, inspiring the visual, musical, and verbal arts; exploration and discovery; war; law; and other elements of culture we've come to cherish (or dread). Swept up by the deepest states of play, one feels balanced, creative, focused. Deep play is a fascinating hallmark of being human; it



reveals our need to seek a special brand of transcendence, with a passion that makes thrill-seeking explicable, creativity possible, and religion inevitable. Perhaps religion seems an unlikely example of playing, but if you look at religious rites and festivals, you'll see all the play elements, and also how deep that play can become." *Diane Ackerman*

## Questions

1. In reading #1, Jim Eller writes, "Play is a form of Unitarian Universalist transcendence," because "...in play we lose ourselves and enter a kind of time out of time." Do you agree? Why or why not? Are there other forms of Unitarian Universalist transcendence? Have you ever experienced transcendence? If yes, please share an experience. Has transcendence ever happened to you while playing? What were the circumstances? Eller relates this transcendence to pure joy or ecstasy. Does this capture your experience? How is the value of play enhanced when connected to transcendence?
2. In reading #2, Peter Gray writes about the play deficit. Growing up in the 1950s, he went to school but he also had ample time to play, which he characterized as a hunter-gather education. What impact did play have for you growing up? Gray thought that his education outside of school through play was more important than in school. Was this true for you? Why or why not? Do you believe that today's children are impoverished relative to play? Why or why not? If yes, what can be done to reverse this trend? Asked differently, how can we increase children's freedom to play?
3. In reading #3, Patrick Thomas Malone and Thomas Patrick write,
4. Reading #4 recounts some of the main points of the book *Finite and Infinite Games* by James Carse. Finite games are rule-based, have winners and losers, and are time-limited. Infinite games have no fixed rules or endpoints. The point of the former is to win, of the latter, to play. Did you play infinite games as a child? How did they compare to finite games? How might an infinite game mindset affect our ideas about competition and collaboration? For you, what is the purpose of the game of life?
5. In reading #5, Patricia Hampl laments the loss of "wasted" time when people engaged in contemplation or meaningful discussions. Do you share her concern? Why or why not? She then shares her encounter with a nun who she asked, "What is the core of the contemplative life?" What answers do you think different people would provide to this question? The nun's answer was leisure. Is the nun's answer persuasive? Why or why not? Leisure, like play, requires the investment of time as the nun clarified. What is the role and value of leisure in your life?
6. In reading #6, Peter Gray praises "Playing is re-creation, an experience of self," clarifying, "We are re-created each time we play." How might this be true? What was play for you as a child? A teenager? An adult? They write, "Understanding that play is the fundamental learning context has tremendous implications for our educational system. Sadly, that system now seems very out of touch with learning as opposed to informing." Do you agree? Why or why not? They add, "All teaching that is not grounded in play simply informs," but, unfortunately, informing is second-hand to experiencing. What problems does this present for education. How can the spirit of play be woven within education to facilitate learning? How would you characterize some of the most positive experiences you had in school? What made them special? Was play a factor?
7. In reading #7, Lewis Hyde recounts a story told by Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet who won the 1971 Nobel Prize in Literature. Neruda became known as a poet when he was just 13 years old. As a young boy, Neruda was looking through a hole in a fence board in his yard and saw a wild landscape on the other side of the fence. A boy's hand reached through the hole and left a battered, old toy sheep that was precious to Neruda. Then, Neruda placed his prized pine-cone through the hole in return. Neruda concluded, "This small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me..., deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light." What things from your childhood were precious to you? Why? How did they affect you?
8. David Spangler distinguishes between play that is an escape from the world and play that is an imaginative encounter with the world. What is the value of each? Which of these do you value more? Why? Spangler concludes, "True play is a doorway into the future and into

the value of social play as "the academy for learning social skills." How did you learn social skills? Gray explains, "Social play involves lots of negotiation and compromise," because you don't want other players to quit. In this regard, what makes negotiation and compromise challenging? Gray notes that the golden rule of social play is, "Do unto others as **they** would have you do unto **them**." Is this golden rule more difficult? Why or why not? The goal of social play, he writes, "is the equality that comes from respecting individual differences and treating each person's needs and wishes as equally important." Is this a goal that you could support? What skills or characteristics would this goal require to achieve? Would empathy and compassion be on the list? Why or why not? Why do many people fall short of Gray's goal? Is there any remedy for this?

**The following questions are related to the Snippets**

8. David Spangler distinguishes between play that is an escape from the world and play that is an imaginative encounter with the world. What is the value of each? Which of these do you value more? Why? Spangler concludes, "True play is a doorway into the future and into

possibility and newness.... Play can be loving and wise; indeed, love and wisdom are at heart playful." In what ways could what he asserts be true?

9. Robert Ellwood likens the natural forces and movement within the universe as play and suggests that they produce joy. He concludes that, "Play is active joy." How could this be true? What feelings did you experience when you were playing as a child? What feelings do you experience when you play now?
10. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza characterizes play as becoming. She writes, "When we are in the process of becoming, we have a chance not just to imagine a different way to be and become but to have a felt sense of the power of our becoming." How do children imagine different ways of becoming through play? How did you imagine different ways of becoming when you were a child? How can play by adults contribute to a sense of becoming?
11. Takeru Nagayoshi summarizes some points made in the book *The Playful Life: The Power of Play in Our Every Day* by Julie Jones and Jed Dearybury. Nagayoshi writes, "Play connects us. Play heals. Play helps us learn." Do you agree? Why or why not? What else can play "do?" He continues, "play isn't simply what we do; it's a mindset we hone, a skill that we sharpen, a habit that we build...." Remembering that play is often serious, how could play as a mindset enrich life?
12. Diane Ackerman, author of *Deep Play*, delves into the nature and importance of play. She writes, "The world of play favors exuberance, license, abandon." Why are these qualities important, especially for children? For Ackerman, play "happens outside ordinary life, and it requires freedom." Do you agree? Why or why not? Does society limit the freedom accorded to children for play? How? How can we empower children in their play? Ackerman concludes, "Make-believe is at the heart of play." What makes make-believe so important?



Photo by ddimitrova on Pixabay

13. The Dalai Lama compares the way children quarrel to the way adults do. The difference is that children express anger and let it go, while some adults hide and harbor anger and resentment. He knows this is true because, children "can still play with that person the following day." Why do adults hold on to anger rather than letting it go and playing again? Could it be that children value their playmates more highly? Why or why not?
14. Drew Leder summarizes the role of play in different world religions. What role does play have in Unitarian Universalism? What congregational play do you value? Why? How can we make our tradition more playful?
15. Kay Redfield Jamison highlights the pleasure that play provides writing, "We play because we have an exuberance of spirits and energy, but we are also exuberant because we play." What benefits do you think play confers? For Jamison, play is also "is a vital facilitator, shaper, and motivator ...which ...creates ... a wider range of possibilities for future actions." How can play shape and motivate children?
16. Lenore Terr writes, "Play is essential to maturity." How could this be true? How did play help to make you who you are? Terr adds, "Play is important to our relationships." This clearly is the case for children. How might it apply to adults? She also quotes Robert Fagen who wrote, "In a world continuously presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares [us] for an evolving planet." Do you agree? Why or why not?
17. Diane Ackerman writes, "Deep play ...makes thrill-seeking explicable, creativity possible, and religion inevitable." What role does play have in thrill-seeking? In this regard, consider a child yelling "Higher," as she is pushed on a swing. What are the similarities between play and creativity? And finally, how is play visible in religious rites and festivals, generally, and within Unitarian Universalism, specifically?