

Sense and Psychotherapy

Thoughts on Psychotherapy and Living

Summer 1999

Dear Reader,

Finally, it's summer! Everyone's on vacation, right? Well, some of us are, and plenty of us will be for at least some portion of it. Even those of us who don't get a true summer vacation often switch to a different mode of thinking as the days get longer and warmer, and the flowers kick into high gear. I know that images of the beach and baseball games, frisbees and barbecues seem to drift unbidden through *my* mind, at least.

One of my favorite pastimes of summer is observing people who don't normally allow themselves the "luxury" of playing for most of the year as they cut loose a bit. I know I feel much more relaxed and happy when I can make a little time to play, and I find I carry that feeling back to work as well. For our mental and physical health, we need to pay more regular attention to the voice that tells us it's OK to put down our work now and then and play.

In my last newsletter I explored the value of work, but there's more to Life than work. So this time, as my mother used to say so often to me and my siblings, go outside and play!

Just the facts...

- Studies show enriched, playful environments actually promote neurological growth.
- Children around the globe display remarkably similar patterns of play.

Just Playing Around

Most people believe that play is important for kids. Not only do they need "downtime" to rest and recharge from adult-directed, goal-oriented activity, but research has demonstrated that proper cognitive and emotional development depends upon an appropriate mix of play and "work". Yet, many of us seem to have a hard time believing that play is equally important for lifelong growth and happiness. As a therapist, I'm thrilled by my clients' excitement when they realize that not only is it okay for them to play, but that they're happier, healthier and more productive when they make play a regular part of their lives.

I tend to use a very broad definition of "play". When we do something simply because we enjoy doing it, not because we think we "have to", or in pursuit of an external goal, we are playing. Often, this can include very purposeful activities such as hobbies or, for a lucky few, even careers. My husband and my father build furniture as a hobby. They do beautiful "work", but seem to have little interest in a piece once it's finished. This puzzled me for a long time, until I realized that, in some sense, they truly *don't* care as much about the finished product. They care about *making* it. That's the essence of play.

Children need to play, and don't outgrow that need as adults. Physical activity develops and maintains fine and gross motor skills, and promotes general health. Group activities exercise social skills and reinforce bonds with friends and family. Relaxed, non-directive activities, everything from recreational reading, to hobbies like gardening or sewing, to simple idle time take our imaginations beyond the boundaries of everyday routine, provoking us to look at the world from unusual and often startlingly novel perspectives. In all these ways and more, play is a crucial part of our lives, from childhood to old age.

Play is, in fact, my primary mode of therapy with children, mainly because it is their most common way of experiencing the world, and their most effective method of communicating that experience. With my adult clients, I find myself encouraging them to play, and sometimes even helping them learn *how* to play after many years of doing little besides work. Oftentimes, highly driven, goal-directed people will get in the habit of turning "play" into "work", so that even their recreational time is highly directed and businesslike. In some sense, they've lost the joy of living in the moment, which is a critical ingredient of play, and in the process they've lost the ability to experience the world *through* play, a crucial factor in lifelong emotional and intellectual growth.

Besides, after everything is said and done, play is just plain fun, and it's hard to overestimate the value of a good time every now and then with lives as complicated and stressful as most of us lead these days. Even kids are pushing harder than I recall doing as a child. Task-oriented, goal-directed activity is a crucial part of personal growth, but so are a wandering mind and a playful spirit. Each of us needs to find ways to strike a balance between the demands of our busy working lives and our need for recreation and simple fun.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation...

As a child, I was always excited when the school year ended and summer vacation began. I could look across the coming summer and see that I had days, weeks and even months, just to *play*. And play I did. My numerous siblings and I were some of the millions of kids growing up in the new suburbia of the '50s and '60s. There were always plenty of kids in the neighborhood to play with, and there always seemed to be plenty of things to do.

I'd start my favorite summer days by getting out of my pajamas and directly into my swimsuit. I wouldn't take the suit off again until I had to put my pajamas back on. We had a large, circular, above-ground pool in our backyard, and many of my most vivid memories are of hot days in the cool water. We did all the typical things kids do in pools; races, whirlpools, underwater "tea parties", dives, flips, Marco Polo. What I liked most of all though was to be in the water all by myself. I'd dive under and listen to my heart beating. I'd dance with my shadow on the bottom of the pool. I'd pretend I was a mermaid and glide about in the sunlit water.

Now when I think back on those endless sunfilled hours (and who ever heard of sunblock?), I can't imagine where the little girl went. Like so many of my friends, I sometimes wonder if I've forgotten how to play. I spend far more time

delighting in watching my 5 year old son play than playing myself. Although I derive a great deal of vicarious pleasure from his total absorption in his activities, I often regret that I seldom seem to allow myself that same freedom. My life has become so filled with my work as a mother, wife and therapist that I seem to have little time or energy left for the things I spent untold hours doing throughout my childhood.

I'm not sure exactly how or when the change took place. It must have been gradual. Where play used to come naturally to me, I find now that I have to exert a conscious effort to make the time and energy for it. Yet, I feel so much better when I do. Even something as simple as reading the comics in the morning makes a difference in the rest of my day. A week's vacation is a highly treasured jewel.

Taking the time to play and have fun also makes a world of difference in my work. Even physically strenuous play leaves me refreshed and energetic. The more I play in my "free" time, the more my work feels like play. I feel more creative, insightful and courageous with my clients, and find it easier to pass along my positive feelings to them.

As for the little girl I was, she hasn't disappeared completely. I can still see her in my mind's eye, swimming about in the glittering water, as immersed in her play as she is in that pool. If I watch long enough though, she'll pause momentarily, and tell me I can still dance with my shadow if I want to.

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If you obey all the rules you miss all the fun.

Katharine Hepburn