

Play: Exploring the Theme

*"Now then, Pooh," said Christopher Robin, "where's your boat?"
"I ought to say," explained Pooh as they walked down to the shore of the island, "that it isn't just an ordinary sort of boat. Sometimes it's a Boat, and sometimes it's more of an Accident. It all depends."
"Depends on what?"
"On whether I'm on the top of it or underneath it."*

— **A.A. Milne**, *Winnie-the-Pooh*

What is play? All mammals play. Play is the primary act of socialization. A playful word, gesture, or appearance indicates to others that we are not harmful. How delightful to see a toddler babble as she imitates our speech! Playfulness softens us and makes us smile.

As we approach others, a fun first impression signals to the group that we want to be included. The group then creates a 'safe space' to allow for that playfulness, for a sense of adventure and discovery, as we learn the rules of the game.

Through play, we learn to control the patterns of our bodies: our muscles, emotions, and cognitive understanding. Through play, we learn the patterns of the material reality that surrounds us: the landscape, wildlife, and the seasons that govern their movements. Through play, we learn the patterns adopted by the group with which we seek belonging: the values, ways of communicating, and roles that make a team strong. Through play, we discover the rules of life – and we eventually learn to master them, so that we can intentionally and effectively form patterns in ourselves, in the world, and in our social spheres.

Humor is a hallmark of play. When our natural rhythms harmonize with the patterns of material and social realities, our good humor shows that we are in a state of active play. Laughter is more specific: when something is out of alignment with natural patterns, we find it funny and we laugh! Laughter serves as a problem-solving mechanism that helps us to sense the unexpected, the overly-rigid, and the absurd.

History remembers certain periods when material and social realities fell to a state of disharmony. When the social leaders who are entrusted with coaching others to participate in the game break the rules of the game themselves, or when the rules shift so that the game fails to take into account natural law – court jesters, holy fools, comedians, and avant-garde artists emerge. A princess in the time of Marie-Antoinette declared to the hungry peasants, "let them eat cake;" the final act of absurdity that signaled to the French that Revolution was near. When social spheres become closed and distant from material reality, jesters, fools, and artists stand at the ready on the outskirts, able to comment from a more expansive perspective, ready to recreate the game in a way that better integrates both material reality and a broader participation base.

As the primary act of socialization, play is serious business. To unite in a spirit of exploration, to discover the principals that will inform a proper path, to devise a travel plan for a long-distance romp with its mishaps and its mirth, typifies the spirit of cooperation and game-making that sustains societies and integrates new members.

Life proceeds from play!

Skillful players know that continuous participation in the game is the way to win.