

PLAY

As we grow older, too many of us forget how to play. We take ourselves far too seriously. The world demands too much of us.

This is a shame.

Play simply means attuning to the most creative and vital parts of ourselves. It means connecting with the raw joy and pleasure of being alive. Play lets our imaginations soar. Because we are not accountable for results, we can dream and dare without fear.

Who has time for that?

When you fail, you suddenly do have time. The world becomes a blank space, at least for a time, while you figure out what to do next. Play is also essential to healing; in the midst of this darkness, you have no choice except to do the things that bring you joy. Your life might depend on it.

Play helped me cope in the aftermath of the Stanford fire. For a year and a half, I had worked without ceasing. Other than time with my family, I had given almost every waking moment to my PhD studies and the Syria Airlift Project.

The day after the fire, I went hiking with friends and watched 4th of July fireworks. In the ensuing days I rose early in the morning, sat outside in the pre-dawn light, and watched birds and trees. I sketched pictures in a small notebook. I went to the library and flipped through architectural magazines, simply because that

sounded pleasing in the moment. I went to the Stanford bookstore with no specific books in mind. I bought one book on creativity and another on physics. Neither had anything to do with drones or Political Science. I sat in the sun and read them.

It felt incredible.

In her memoir *The Sharp End of Life: A Mother's Story*, Dierdre Wolownick writes of her painful fourteen-year marriage coming to an end. As she puts the pieces of her life back together, she realizes how little she has ever done for herself. She has so much to learn about herself, relationships, community, and her own interests and passions. In this playful season she takes up marathon running to better relate to her daughter Stacia, and then rock climbing to better relate to her son, the legendary climber Alex Honnold, whose unroped climb of Yosemite Valley's 3,000 ft. El Capitan was captured in the film *Free Solo*.

Her book spoke to me precisely because Wolownick is not a superstar like her son. She is an ordinary mother, with no particular athletic talents, who laces up her sneakers for the first time in her mid-50s. She will never win an Olympic medal. She runs and climbs because these activities bring her joy and open up a dazzling new world of possibilities. They connect her to her children, new friends, and communities of people who find their lives enriched by their passions.

Wolownick will probably never become a professional climber, but at 66 she became the oldest woman to climb El Capitan. Her thirst to play also gave rise to her extraordinary memoir. Play gave her—and us—something far more compelling than a record marathon time or a mere climbing achievement. It gave us a story. It gave us *life*.

But see how seductive the lure of achievement is? I started

writing about play with no rational payoff. Within paragraphs, I drifted into world records and revenue-generating books.

Play is rarely enough for us.

We demand more of it. Play is fine, we say, as long as it is a gateway into something more. Maybe it will be, and we can celebrate our good fortune. But often it isn't, and maybe that is the best kind.

Every parent fights this battle. We long for connection with our children, but every day a thousand distractions compete for our attention. Is it ever enough for us to watch our toddler descend the slide for the 37th time?

The utilitarian impulse cries out to do something more valuable. The phone is always in our pocket. We can watch our kids *and* send that e-mail or catch up with friends on social media or read the news. We can pop in our AirPods and consume an audiobook while still flipping cards in Candy Land; the kids will barely notice.

I am not picking on you; I am the worst about this.

We desperately resist giving ourselves over to frivolous play.

I am not sure why. Usually, when our children take us by the hand, they want to pull us into a world that is unbelievably fascinating, if we only have eyes to see. For children, everything is magical.

“Look at that cloud!” a daughter says. In that moment we have a choice. We can mumble a robotic, “Yes, honey, that’s wonderful.” Or we can look up and really *see* that cloud, and marvel at the shifting infinite variety in that vaulted sky, and imagine sailing ships and vast balloon-like elephants and dragons exhaling smoke

We can hold roly-polys in our hand, catch ladybugs, build forts for ants, or craft swords from scrap wood and pretend we are knights. Having children gives us permission to revel in the world again.

We can still cultivate that childlike sense of wonder even if we

do not have children. Wendy and I rented a beachfront condo for a portion of our honeymoon. When we arrived, I was aghast to discover that the balcony overlooked sprawling mud flats; we could barely see the ocean. I stalked angrily around the apartment for a while before I spotted Wendy lingering at the railing. When I joined her, I found that she was delighting in the innumerable species of birds and other creatures in the mud below—extraordinary little miracles of nature I had lacked the eyes to see.

All three of my children love to create. My son Isaiah went through a phase where he drew twenty or thirty pictures in a sitting. He stuffed every crevice in his bedroom with drawings, colorings, maps, mazes, stories, nonfiction books, songbooks, prayers, and handmade games. We literally could not keep up with him. Every few weeks I sneaked guiltily into his room with a garbage bag to cart off ninety percent of his work, snapping photos of the best and tucking the most precious treasures into a keepsakes box.

His creative output was staggering. I envied his disregard for anyone's opinion, least of all his own. He had no internal editor, no filter, no one to please... just the joy of unleashing that extraordinary imagination onto the page.

My children are each unique, and as they get older, their play changes. Isaiah built an elaborate website for a Hogwarts-style university that educates magic horses. Mariam loves to give gifts, and fills the world with cards, knitted scarves, and hand-made envelopes packed with treasures. Colin sews costumes and builds little houses for his stuffed animals, and is following in Isaiah's footsteps by building a website to teach chameleons how to hack computers. Last week all three built elaborate Viking shields out of scrap plywood. I scrambled to help when I heard them fire up the jigsaw.

This is play at its best. This is what we lose as we grow older

and more responsible.

I mourn for what my children will lose. I want to stop it somehow, to take them by the shoulders and tell them how beautiful they are, how wonderful their imaginations are, warn them to never grow old.

But they will grow up. I cannot stop time.

Instead, I have to do something much harder: model what I want for them.

I have always wanted to learn to play the piano. During my final dissertation push, I finally tried. I needed an activity in which it was okay to be bad.

In the evenings after the kids went to bed, I poured a glass of wine, sat down at the piano, and hammered out crude renditions of musical masterpieces like *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, *When the Saints Go Marching In*, and *Jingle Bells*. I slowly built up a repertoire of chords.

So what if I played like an eight-year-old? I did it for myself. If I improved just a little each day, in two or three years I would be able to do what I have always dreamed of: sit down at a piano and fill silence with beauty.

Every missed note was a message to the world that I didn't really care what it thought, at least in this domain. It gave the finger to perfectionism, to the pressure-cooker of success and achievement. By engaging in an activity that had no utilitarian value, I reclaimed a tiny piece of my life.

I am embarrassed to admit these self-taught piano lessons did not last long. Life overran me. But that is okay, because this was play. Perhaps it was a bit like my children, pouring all their manic energy into building LEGO cities one week, sewing pillows the next, and then making chain mail armor the week after that. They love the thrill of discovery and learning. Play leads us to wherever we will be happy.

The Coronavirus lockdown reminded us of the importance of play at a national scale. Every individual, family, school, business, and government institution reached its breaking point. Each and every day, in new ways, we heard the thundering *crack* of strength encountering its limit. The damage was catastrophic, but somehow we are still here, struggling along, afraid, alone, reaching out, lifting each other up, trying to rebuild even as failures continues to unfold.

We have no choice except to yield ourselves to grace. To admit our limits, defeats, fears, and hopes. In the midst of all this, imprisoned within our own homes, play became an essential activity. Neighbors placed teddy bears in their windows to facilitate scavenger hunts for children. Families congregated on Zoom. We collectively devoured films and played board games online. Some of us tried to pick up another language or a musical instrument. Many of us struggled to get very far because we are stressed out and homeschooling and trying to work from home.

I took up piano again—for another two weeks. I made it a little further than before. I added Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* to my repertoire, a song that is at least beautiful.

We are trying. We haven't completely forgotten how to play.

That is good.

That is a beginning.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

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CONTINUAL ASCENT

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