I arrived into the world a little more fully. Our to be alive. Every time somebody sang to me, Having my birthday celebrated made me happy Hooray! Let’s celebrate! teeth unbrushed. It was enough just to be born. was messy, my report card disappointing, and my to deserve it. Birthdays happened even if my room above all, the fact that I didn’t have to do anything but royally enthroned nonetheless. And I loved, and birthday dress, more tomboy than princess, loved being the birthday girl in my birthday hat that got lost or broken by the end of the week. I a thrill. I loved the special games with cheap prizes wish, and watch me blow out the candles gave me what it is. We sniff it, lick it, and roll around in it, covering every inch of her entrails. As children we also rush to meet every will stop her from chasing, sniffing, licking, then rolling around in it, covering every inch of her exuberant furry self in whatever it is (usually fish entrails). As children we also rush to meet every person, feeling thing, and event that catches our interest. We sniff it, lick it, and roll around in it, until it becomes part of us.

We come into the world with a full blast for life, an insatiable appetite for our own becoming. From peek-a-boo to post office, dress ups to drama class, life is about discovery and discovery is play. I see the same zest now in my dog, Luna, when she catches the scent of something she likes. Nothing will stop her from chasing, sniffing, licking, then rolling around in it, covering every inch of her exuberant furry self in whatever it is (usually fish entrails). As children we also rush to meet every person, feeling thing, and event that catches our interest. We sniff it, lick it, and roll around in it, until it becomes part of us.

A few years ago I lived in an apartment above a pre-school. Every morning I watched, mesmerized while four year-olds burst through the doors and hurled themselves into the day, bumping, tripping, bouncing, building, smashing, hitting, laughing, hugging. I had the feeling I was watching the raw business of the universe, the inner workings of evolution itself. It’s easy to imagine the doors of the playground burst- ing open 15 billion years ago with atoms, molecules, and all manner of organisms, hurling themselves like four year-olds into existence, slithering, bumping, and merging – growing eyes, ears, and feathers, building cities, writing poems, fighting wars. Each new form sing- ing, “Here I am in an amazing world!”

After all, it is the nature of the universe to perpetually give birth. Space/time foams into being, actualities manifest from probabilities. By the time you finish this sentence, quadrillions of life forms will have come in and out of existence. The Milky Way, squid, tulips, and giant Sequoias are all children of this fertile female cosmos. Within the oceanic womb – whether the literal sea, the mother’s belly, the quantum void, or our own fecund imaginations – ingredients are busy comb- ining in novel ways, simmering into new forms that are delivered with the force of all creation (and a Hallelujah chorus) onto the playground. Death is no threat to the play. In fact, he’s a special guest at the party, serving up the ingredients needed for the next birth.

It continues to amaze me how when we partici- pate through our own creative endeavors in the birthing of things, the force of the universe courses through us. We are miraculously sustained through long hours of labor, discovering superhuman reserves of strength and endurance; as much in the birth of a baby, and the creation of a painting, as in the produc- tion of a magazine. This cosmic play bounds freely between order and chaos. It doesn’t care about task lists or making messes. Its only purpose is to keep the play going. Games have rules, but if the rules inhibit too much of the play, play breaks the rules or finds a better game. Play or- ganizes the body, toning it and coordinating movements making us graceful crea- tures. But it also places a banana peel underfoot so we trip and fall reminding us to stay flexible, pay attention and above all, to laugh at ourselves. Whole civilizations form out of play, with elaborate rituals and high culture. But then play tips off the masks of civilized decorum to reveal our animal impulses and appetites. Play invents a teacup then turns it upside down so it can become a hat. It organizes then randomizes. Sets the rhythm then skips a beat.

To live in this playful world is to live playfully – with soft knees, an open heart, and arms out-
stretched welcoming each moment. It is to improvise, welcoming things as they are while adding to them creatively. As soon as we impose a purpose or agenda, we lose the full presence that makes play possible. Play doesn’t move steadfast in straight lines, it meanders, galumphs, circles, and leaps. It invites us to follow the curvy feminine path of our deepest impulses and attractions as they twist and turn, ebb and flow moment to moment. Simply following our deepest aimless impulses brings forth the most brilliant and beautiful offspring.

Since my earliest birthdays, I have been learning how to live life as play and celebration. I’ve used each birthday as a reminder that I was, in fact, born to play. Some years have been more challenging than others, with the inevitable losses and disappointments accumulating along the way. But it wasn’t until a few years ago that I faced the full impact of the forces that most threaten my play. September 11th, the day of the terrorist attacks, happens to be my birthday. My special day of celebration was hijacked by world events, grief, terror, and seriousness. War and terror is a symptom of a play-deprived culture. The hijackers that attacked the World Trade Center wrote it explicitly in a letter. “Purify your soul from all unclean things. Completely forget something called ‘this world’. The time for play is over, and the serious time is upon us.” September 11th has come to represent the beginning of serious times.

For the last four years, I have attempted to celebrate my life while gazing right into the horrors of our time. The day forces me to face my full ambivalence about being alive in such a crazy, violent, play-deprived world. Determined that my play be more than just a superficial attempt to escape or defend against the pain of the world, I’ve had to dig deep to find the source of joy that makes it possible to celebrate life no matter what’s going on. The hijackers were right. Forgetting the world ends the game. It is in remembering the world that our play is truly liberated. The present moment, wherever it may be, is the only door to the playground. Since 2001, terror has crashed my party. I have learned to welcome it and remember the world. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, “Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.” No feeling is final. Pain becomes peace becomes joy becomes a sneeze. The river flows, the muses sing, the play must go on. Only by letting everything happen to us can we let the world play through us and feel how it is made through and through of love. The face of love is beauty and its movement is play.

When times get serious, it is more important than ever that we play.

When times get serious, it is more important than ever that we play. After all, it is our love of life that will save the world, not our fear of destruction. We don’t have to like what’s going on around us, but we can sing and dance our protest, make puppets, write letters, devise ingenious playful alternatives. While suicide bombers risk their lives for a cause, we need to risk our causes, our beliefs, and identities, for life itself. Every year, on September 11th, I find my way back to the birthday party. From the front lines, I can report that the time for seriousness is over and the time for play upon us. Happy Birthday to you!!!

Take a day to celebrate the births happening all around and within you. Throw them little parties. Sing songs that don’t rhyme. Give them the gift of your appreciation and welcome them into the world to play.

by Gwen Gordon

Phlying Penguin Birthday Song

So now around you as you go
Look past the forms of things you know
Into the heart of an emergent flow
Where birth and death dance to and fro.

Yahoo yip yip toodledoodly dee

When you look close enough you’ll surely see
From the rise of the sun to the pod of a pea

That life is a glorious birthday party!