play

the Movement of Love

By Gwen Gordon


AN ANGEL hovering above the world must feel the same way, gazing down at this one big rumpus with all its scraped knees and first kisses. Myriad life forms emerging out of the primordial seas, gathering together, creating more life forms, making cities, cities falling apart, people fighting, others writing poems, the aurora borealis, jellyfish, fleas that jump into the nostrils of hummingbirds, 2,000 year old Sequoias. The qualities that are so exuberantly displayed in childhood play are writ large in the evolutionary process on a cosmological scale. The whole Universe is one big playground, and evolution one great big, gorgeous rumpus.

Watching the play every morning my heart would burst with delight because the cosmos is delightful. Then it occurred to me—I was feeling waves of love watching the children play, not because they are so adorable and I have a biological clock, but because play itself is the movement of love.

Most of us were taught that the Universe is a deadly serious place, run by fixed laws, chance and necessity—like a machine: Our human world a small island of meaning and civility in a vast sea of violence and indifference. The image has no romance, no delight. Is it any wonder that we now live in deadly serious times, full of terror and madness? We have created the world that fits our worldview.

But the view of the Universe as a collection of fixed objects is not fixed. It is shifting to a view of the Universe as what Thomas Berry calls, a “communion of subjects.” Everything in the Universe is intimately relating to everything else. Eros is running the whole show with attractions of every kind pulling for communion, physically, emotionally, and spiritually in every curve of the cosmos. There’s no such thing as empty space anymore. Space is as empty as the space between lovers’ eyes. It’s teeming with desire, electrical charges, and sexy curves in the Universe’s wild embrace.

It might seem as if we’ve come a

continued on page 8
long way from child’s play. What I saw on the playground, though, was immensely erotic and intimate. It was pure, raw and lusty life force impelling those children to grapple with gravity and their own coordination to discover what a human can do and make. By far the most common use of words for play in most languages is in an erotic context. Diane Ackerman tells us that: “The Sanskrit word for copulation is kridaratham, which translates as ‘the jewel of games.’ In German, a spielkind (literally a ‘play child’) is a baby born out of wedlock. In English we make a play for, play up to, indulge in love play.” We also have foreplay, and Playboy magazine with playmates-of-the-month. If the evolving Universe is a communion of subjects then evolution is love play, the intimately creative adventure of Eros.

Until recently, evolutionary theory was a grim picture—nature, red in tooth and claw where only the fittest survived, new species emerging only through chance and necessity. Now we have a slightly kinder, juicier, and more mischievous picture. Stephen Jay Gould gave us the term “exaptation” to describe how nature improvises by coopting previously evolved functions to do new things. This helps explain flight. Imagine a bug in the tropics. It can’t regulate its own body temperature so it has to grow elaborate fans on its back to stay cool. One particularly hot summer afternoon, a bug with a pair of fans the size of which no other bug had ever seen before sits fanning itself dreamily. Suddenly—Whooooooooo—a flying bug.

Improvisation lifts us up and out of our daily habits to see things from a new perspective. Now that’s a playful Universe.

Exaptation is pure improvisation. It’s like the character in the movie Airplane who, when given a document and asked what he makes of it, answers, “Well, I could make a hat, or a broach, or maybe a little paper airplane.” Nature takes what’s there and makes stuff up. Before I got a Master’s degree I used to put the initials M.S.U. after my name. They stood for “Make Stuff Up.” I had no idea that making stuff up was wired right into the human brain. Gould says that the human brain is par excellence the chief exemplar of exaptation. This is because, about 150,000 years ago the species that specializes in being un-specialized.

If the Universe were a collection of fixed objects governed by fixed laws, then it would be wise to stay rigid. But the Universe is a fluid current of living play, so our own improvisational play and flexibility is essential for going with the flow of the cosmos, responding creatively to moment to moment to the changing needs, demands, and opportunities we meet. When we play, we enter the creative current of possibilities, the self-organizing force of the whole cosmos, as active participants. Before the human, all animals were specialized for particular niches. We have the flexibility of the cosmos dancing right in our neurons, enabling us to move into any niche and explore the whole world as a playground.

While play is built right into the cosmos, it’s generally agreed that playfulness didn’t come on the animal scene until about 150-200 million years ago, with mammals and birds in the Jurassic period. As I write this, my dog Luna is shaking her rope toy, insisting I stop what I’m doing this instant and play tug-of-war. Meanwhile, my neighbor has a diabolic African Gray Parrot who repeatedly calls the dog, Patrick, over to her cage yelling, “Patrick!!” then spills the water dish over his head and laughs out loud, “Ar ar ar.” Most animals outgrow the playfulness of their youth, but humans are curious and playful, exploring the world, learning, playing practical jokes, and inventing things throughout our whole lifetimes. That’s because in some sense we never really grow up. Compared to other animals, the human rate of development is extremely slow. As a result, childhood qualities extend all the way into old age. This phenomenon is called neoteny. Neoteny causes us to retain qualities like curiosity, sensitivity, imagination, wonder, flexibility, humor, optimism, honesty, and spontaneous
expression, and remain in an unending state of development potentially through our whole lives. Humans are developmentally adolescent chimps that have become sexually mature.

Remaining childlike enhances our capacity for communion. Like Cupid, a Greek image for Eros, neoteny is the romantically savvy child who, with an impish, knowing wink, shoots Eros onto the scene. Because of neoteny the human pelvis doesn’t rotate like it does with most large primates, enabling humans to make love face to face. Our extended childhood makes us softer, rounder, smoother, and more sensitive. Compared to our primate ancestors, we are much less aggressive, far more cooperative, and capable of depths of emotion and care that are the basis of art and culture.

While we can thank neoteny in general for the finest aspects of civilization, it is the resulting intensity of the mother/child bond that deserves most of the credit. The mother/child bond has to be extraordinarily intense because humans are born extremely premature. As newborns, we are utterly helpless little fetuses. In contrast, picture the newborn colt standing and walking within the first day of being born. We, on the other hand, leave the physical womb before we have even finished gestating. We can’t crawl for three to six months and require eight years of protective care to finish our development. We are utterly and completely dependent on our caregiver’s constant, nurturing care. Our bond with her is our second womb.

This means that an amazing and mysterious thing has to happen if the baby is to survive. The caretaker has to embody the profoundly nurturing qualities of the mother’s womb, the compassion of the womb of the whole universe, or the baby will die. And this is exactly what happens. Many new mothers never imagined they were capable of so much love, they’re drunk with it. This is the compassion of the universe awakening in the human to serve its ongoing play. The child’s adventurous play and the mother’s loving care emerge together through the dance of the baby’s exquisite intimate dependence.

The Indo-European word plegan, the root for play, means to risk, chance, expose oneself to hazard. Adventurous play is risk. We can risk to the extent that we feel safe and held in love. In turn, what we hold in love can open to the world and play. The cosmos wouldn’t be in a dance of evolving play if it weren’t held by the caring curvature of spacetime in a tender gravitational embrace. This curve, the mother’s embrace, enables the whole play of evolution. Play and care are the order and chaos of a creative cosmos, but through the human the cosmos can play with and care for itself like never before.

So why, if care and play are so essential to our nature, are we violently dehumanizing ourselves and the planet? What went wrong? We have not grown into our destiny as cosmic playmates because we do not feel ourselves held in a loving cosmos. Care and play in balance generate ingenious inventions that add to the life and beauty of the world. Out of balance, they wreak havoc. Care with a lack of play is static, while play with a lack of care is disconnected and cruel. Milan Kundera writes about the laughter of devils and the laughter of angels in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. He describes the laughter of devils as laughter at the meaninglessness of things, and the laughter of angels as laughter with the meaning of things. The laughter of devils is play without care.

On the playground, I watched the occasional outburst of tears when someone got too rough, bossy, mean, or exclusive. There were others who stayed on the edge of the playground cut off from the play. Play is a sign of health. When a child is overly aggressive or withdrawn from play something is wrong. In the ’60s, psychiatrist Stuart
Brown did extensive research on the personal histories of horribly violent mass murderers and others "on the fringe," and found that all of them had lacked natural, spontaneous, free-spirited play during their childhood. A lack of nurturing care combined with a lack of play is deadly because it goes against the grain of the whole Universe.

As a culture we are like the child sitting on the edge of the playground, unaware of the playmates all around us. Thinking that we're separate from the world, we are cut off from the sense of being held that makes play possible. Our play impulses are lacking the tempering influence of care. The disproportionate amount of money spent on the military and prisons instead of education and social programs is a portrait of a homicidal, play-deprived culture sitting on the edge of the playground. We have yet to come into our true nature and powers as cosmic playmates.

The Buddha described how the noblest qualities have "near enemies," qualities that are often mistaken for the noble ones, but which lack deep care and connection. In the Buddha's teachings, the near enemy of equanimity is disinterest. I propose that the near enemy of play is entertainment and recreation. Competitive sports, video games, luxury cruises, and high stakes gambling on the stock market are not play. Neither is drug use, or shopping sprees. They are attempts to get relief from the gray backdrop of our play-deprived lives through forms of near-play that lack intimacy with the world. That is why near-play quickly becomes compulsive. It can never satisfy our deepest urges for true play as intimate participation in the cosmos. The free-spirited true play that is our birthright has become so dangerously distorted by a play-deprived culture that we confuse it for war.

The philosopher James Carse, in a brilliant little book called *Finite and Infinite Games*, describes the difference between finite and infinite play. Infinite play has rigid limits, rules, winners and losers, and does not include everybody in the game. Infinite play, on the other hand, changes the rules as needed and includes everyone. The whole purpose of infinite play is to keep the play going. Now we can see a little more clearly what has gone wrong in our world. Without caring connection, infinite play becomes finite. With high stakes, winners and losers, it takes itself very seriously and when you take things too seriously you end up dropping bombs. The ultimate expression of this is war.

We can risk anything. We can trust that no matter how foolish, confused, or inept we might be, we will not fall out of the web of life. Being held keeps us from holding back from the world and lets us participate play-fully.

Spiritually realized people tend to be the most mischievous, childlike, and playful of all. Infinite play is the natural expression of a liberated consciousness that recognizes itself as the ground of being. This is our own true infinite, unbounded nature that we share with the whole cosmos. We meditate for hours, do prostrations, chant and tie ourselves in pretzels, in order to touch the Absolute, to feel held in the wild embrace of the Divine. We touch the Absolute in order to play in the relative. With the divine mother's spiritual maturity and the divine chid's flexibility and enthusiasm, our perceptions of the world are as fluid as the world itself. We can sense reality as the powerful, loving, creative ground of our being.
intimate movement of the Divine, the
Eeke, illusion, or Divine play. The word
for illusion literally means “in play.” The
ultimate goal of spiritual practice is
enlightenment, the lightness of being
that comes from recognizing the world
as play. It is the liberation from a finite
identity in a finite game to the infinite.

So how do you stay light in heavy
times? In the Dine Navajo culture, a
person with imbalances is given a special
blessing ritual to heal them. This
involves the whole tribe coming together
to hold them in beauty and tell the
cosmic creation story for many nights on
end. Beauty and the story of the Uni-
verse remind us that we are held in the
compassionate embrace of the cosmic
mother. Our greatest challenge and
opportunity in this time is to find our
way to feeling profoundly held. Our
hearts are aching for it. When we have
this, we can include everything we
experience into the play. As Rainier
Maria Rilke wrote, “Let everything
happen to you, beauty and terror, no
feeling is final.” Whatever you’re feeling,
if you greet it as a playmate, it will begin
to move.

Play is movement. When something
has play, it has wiggle room. It isn’t rigid
or fixed. With play a regular stiff stick
becomes a joy stick. There is inherent joy
and ecstasy in the movement of play.
Ecstasy or ex-stasis, literally means
standing aside, or getting off our spots.
You can’t play unless you can move,
whether physically, emotionally, or
spiritually. If you’re stuck, then play will
help. Wiggle your grief, your pain, your
depression. Give it breath, find its edges,
exaggerate it, paint it, sing it, put a clown
nose on it. Play gets us off of our spots,
our tragic stories, our habitual ways of
thinking and being, and brings us
present with the constant movement of
love that is the Universe. There can be
pain in the present moment, but in the
infinite play, pain is felt fully and then
moves into something else, and some-
thing else after that.

If we forget to play, we lose our love
for life, and loving life is what will save
our world, not fearing destruction. We’re
desperate to be invited into our joy, into
our energy source, the belly laugh, the
burst of giggles, wild abandonment, bright
color and zest for life of play. The
laughing Buddha is fat to show that even
the most massive bulk can lift off the
ground—with a big enough laugh.
Laughter is the sound of play and a
doorway into play. Right now, wherever
you are, put this article down and laugh.
Not because there’s anything funny
going on, but because you’re free to
laugh. It may seem awkward at first, but
stretch into it. Get off your spot. You will
discover that you can find ecstasy just by
moving toward it. Play is the movement
of love, and love is what moves the
Universe. Never underestimate, espe-
cially during a time of crisis, the power

of play to move the world. Indeed it’s
the only thing that ever did.

“...and we should consider every day lost on
which we have not danced at least once.
And we should call every truth false which
was not accompanied by at least one laugh.”
—Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

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