A Conversation With Zoe: Play, Games & Sport

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Chapter IV

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Play, Games, & Sport

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Might play be the primary condition through which the universe was created? Might the very "work" of the universe be its play?

To run with the wind, to play with sand, to play with water are not merely idle statements of language, but real descriptions of what a child does when he or she encounters these properties.

- Richard Lewis

The following conversation is the text, to the best of my memory, of a discussion I had with our seven year-old daughter Zoé. It happened on a beautiful spring morning as we walked and ran on the beach in front of our New England home. The discussion began while we were watching the gulls play after they finished their morning breakfast of crab that had washed ashore. Zoé asked me to tell her again the story about the time she played with the young boy on the slide at the Park of Roses in Columbus, Ohio. She was occasionally reminded of this story as I tell it to my college students and whenever Zoé visited the college my students would ask her about the young boy and the slide.

As you read this chapter I would like you to pretend that you're on a personal journey to understand play. You can be anywhere you like. Some of you may choose to remain in the comfort of your home, some may choose to run with Zoé and I along the beach, and still others may choose to be actively engaged in other forms of play. Please feel free to stop reading and ask yourself questions at any time. When you ask questions you are engaged in philosophic thought. You are thinking about play and its relationship to your human nature and conduct.
The Conversation

Daddy (John K.) - Zoé! Stop running for a minute. Look over there! Those gulls look like they are playing with each other. They almost look like they are laughing.

Zoé - (Slowing down to a walk). Dad! Look at that big one. Do you think he is the daddy bird? He looks like an old bird.

Daddy - You don't have to be old to be a daddy! And, that "he bird," just may be a "she bird." That might be a mother gull. Look at all of them. They look like they are using that big rock as a slide. They are slipping down the rock into the water. I have never seen birds do that before.

Zoé - Maybe that is why they are laughing. Dad, remember the time I went down that big slide in Columbus, Ohio? Remember that boy who I played with? Can you tell me that story again?

Daddy - Yes, I remember. You laughed just like these birds when you reached the bottom of the slide. The slide story is important because your play with the young boy and the slide helped your dad understand the many wonders of play. Your simple lesson taught me to appreciate how important play is to our life.

Zoé - Remember that little boy dad? He was pretty silly wasn't he? How old was he?

Daddy - You are probably about his age now, seven years old. I wonder if he still lives in Columbus and still goes to that park. I am so thankful to you and that little boy for sharing with me the miracle of play.

(The Wonders Of Play are listed here as a prelude to their discussion in our conversation. The ten wonders that are listed come from the literature and many experiences about and with play).
The Wonders of Play

One - Play involves movement of the bodily being.

Two - Play is a voluntary activity (free).

Three - Play involves risk.

Four - Play involves imitation of other human beings and the environment.

Five - Play involves pretending (make believe).

Six - Play involves bonding between other human beings and the environment.

Seven - Play involves alternation and change.

Eight - The product of play is only play (play is not done for profit or material gain).

Nine - Play involves a solution or resolution.

And, despite what outsiders might think or say, to the participants.

Ten - Play is a very serious activity.
**Daddy** - We were living in Columbus, Ohio while Daddy was working on his doctorate at The Ohio State University. One day when I had a morning free you and I went across the street from where we lived to play in the Park of Roses. It was a beautiful fall morning.

**Zoé** - Yes, I remember. We lived in that tiny apartment and Cindy lived across the hall from us. Doesn't Cindy live in Puerto Rico now?

**Daddy** - Yes, and she has a young brother. What was his name?

**Zoé** - I don't remember. It was a funny name. Maybe Alvin?

**Daddy** - I don't remember either. While at the park you noticed a young boy, six or seven years of age, climbing-up and swishing down a giant slide that stood in the corner of the park. You ran quickly (movement) over to the tall slide. This was the first time your dad had ever seen you go near this particular slide (voluntary). At first you stood very patiently next to the slide and watched the young boy climb up the ladder and swish down the slide. Shortly thereafter you walked over to the tall ladder and slowly began to climb towards the top (risk). I quickly ran over to the slide when I realized that you were actually going to climb to the top of the ladder. Only being two years old, I wanted to make sure that you did not stumble or fall. I remained quietly behind the ladder as you made your way to the top. When you reached the top, you sat your small body down and waited on the landing, thinking about your next move. You had sensed the young boy's action on the slide and seemed ready to copy his feat (imitation). Carefully, you nudged yourself away from the landing and swished down the slippery slope. What do you think your face looked like as you gathered your thoughts at the bottom of the slide? Can you show me?

**Zoé** - Was I happy?

**Daddy** - Yes! Do you remember that moment? Can you show me?

**Zoé** - No! (Zoe smiles and chuckles).

**Daddy** - See! You do remember. As you stood on the ground near the bottom of the slide your face was filled with happiness and joy. You had accomplished something that you had never done before. For a brief moment you were a different person who would never be the
same because a new dimension had just been added to your being (pretending). And this, your first journey with your new friends, the little boy and the slide, was just the beginning (bonding with another human being and the environment).

Zoé - Then what did the little boy do? Tell me that part.

Daddy - After watching your first triumph your new friend, a friendship developed without even talking, went back to the ladder and climbed to the top again (alternation). At the top, he turned his body over onto his stomach and swished down the slide on his tummy. Seeing this new method of going down the slide, you proceeded to climb the ladder again. I again remained behind the ladder to insure your safety. When you reached the top you, like your new friend, turned yourself over onto your tummy (change). This intricate position took some slick maneuvering on your part. Laying on your tummy you carefully pushed yourself away from the safety of the landing and swished down the slippery slide a second time. When you arrived at the bottom your face was once again glowing with happiness.

Zoé - Then what did the little boy do?

Daddy - Be patient. I'll tell you. After the tummy slide, your new friend scurried up the ladder a third time and rested on the landing. Without any talking between the two of you, you climbed the ladder and sat down behind the young boy. He waited patiently as you adjusted your legs around his body. How you knew what to do is one of the many mysteries of play. Once in place, the two of you went down the slide together. When you reached the bottom of the slide both of you were filled with a sense of delight. You smiled at each other and acknowledged your success. The young boy then ran away to another area of the park while you stood and thought about your accomplishments (resolution).

Zoé - I wish I could go down a big slide like that again. Isn't there a slide like the one in Columbus in the park by Cranberry World? Maybe we can go there someday.

Daddy - Maybe you should join the gulls and slide down that big rock. That would be fun, wouldn't it?
Zoé - Dad, it is too cold to do that. I might be able to slide down that rock when it gets hotter outside. Oh, Dad! Look at this piece of pretty beach glass.

Daddy - That is a jewel from the ocean. Let's run again shall we?

Witnessing the events on that beautiful fall morning in the Park of Roses provided me with an awakening of sorts. Thanks to Zoé and the young boy I was able to make simultaneous sense out of the wonders of play. I had witnessed movement, free activity, risk, imitation, pretending, bonding, alternation, change, and resolution. Moreover, I had seen two young children who were engaged in a very serious activity.

Zoé’s play with the young boy on the slide taught her that she could challenge herself and be triumphant. She gained an understanding of, and an adoration for, her capabilities. She also gained an appreciation and a respect for learning about, and from, other human beings and the world around her. There were no extraneous agendas or strings attached (profit or material benefits).

Since that beautiful fall morning in Columbus there have been many occasions where I have expanded my understanding of the importance of play by, “Running with Zoé.” The wonders of play are her path to knowledge and experience about herself and her world. Like Zoé, every one of us has acquired wisdom through the wonder of play. We have created and recreated our world with play.

Play is overflowing with intrinsic rewards. Some of these rewards have already been discussed during our run with Zoé. For example, we discussed the intrinsic rewards gained from humans experiencing their bodies being physical. We also discussed the importance of bonding with other humans. Other intrinsic rewards that we receive from our participation in play are freedom, learning to take risks, learning through imitation, learning to bond with the environment, learning to alternate and change, and learning about resolution.

Learning about freedom (voluntary activity) is a special intrinsic reward from our participation in play. We are free to choose to play, or free to choose not to play. Our bodily
beings are unconstrained. This freedom although brief, teaches humans that they can be self-governing and independent beings. When you combine this reward with the previously mentioned reward of working cooperatively with other human beings (bonding) you have the essential ingredients for an emancipated and democratic society. Play can be a model for a free and cooperative world.

Learning to take risks is another intrinsic reward we receive from our participation in play. Risks are simply anything that frightens us. Through play we learn to take risks and in so doing we overcome our fears. Zoe’s mastery of the giant slide is an excellent example of how play provides opportunities for humans to overcome their fears. Moreover, our successes in and through play inspire us to risk again. Slowly play's process of fear and mastery pushes us forward.

Still another notable reward is imitation. It is through imitation that we learn. We observe other humans and our environment and copy the movement, language, personality, and energy. We have learned what to be from copying. We have become someone or something else (pretending). Social psychologists call this phenomenon, The Social Learning Theory. At the root of this theory is the wonder of play.

Because play can be a rehearsal of things to come it is important that the imitative and pretending experiences be moral and wholesome. If human beings imitate too many immoral or unwholesome experiences, they may be rehearsing for a life filled with decadence and despair. We must realize that through play people are listening, people are seeing, and people are learning.

Bonding with the environment is yet another reward we receive from our participation in play. Play provides the means whereby the relationships between human beings and the environment are established. The environmental playground is our classroom. This is the arena where we learn respect and an appreciation for the world around us. Through play participants learn to treasure fresh air, sparkling water, beautiful skies, and other living things. Although often overlooked, this is an extremely important reward. It provides human beings with
opportunities to respect, appreciate, and therefore preserve the grandeur of our environmental playground. To create and maintain positive relationships in our environmental playground it is necessary to learn about alternation and change. Alternation and change can be two of play’s finest rewards. Alternation can teach us important lessons about sharing and help us to expand our feelings towards other human beings and the environment. Alternation is facilitated by our openness to accept change. To alternate we must be willing to add to, or delete from, our thoughts, ideas, principles, habits, and customs. The wonder of play provides an infinite array of opportunities for us to learn about and practice both alternation and change.

Another reward we receive from our participation in play is that eventually it will play-out. In other words there will always be a solution or resolution. The resolutions from play could be as simple as Zoé’s radiance after her success on the slide or as complex as ten judges trying to resolve the unsuccessful performance of a figure skater. The resolution could also be one of sorrow after an agonizing defeat or one of glory after exhilarating success. One of the great rewards from play is that it teaches us that sooner or later, regardless of the complexity, sorrow, or glory our efforts will yield a resolution. It is our awareness of, and our anticipation for the resolution, that inspires us to play again, and again, and again.

As you have discovered, throughout history play has provided humans with a myriad of intrinsic rewards. These rewards have furnished the sustenance that secured our continued progress and evolution. Any phenomenon with a record of success deserves our steadfast commitment to insure continued responsible progress and honorable evolution.