



Outro

We move, we play, we become.

LOIS HALZMAN, THE PLAY REVOLUTIONARY, BELIEVES PLAY WILL TRANSFORM THE WORLD AROUND US FOR THE BETTER. IT IS TIME TO FIND OUR PLAY.

Photography: Chris Baker
Words: Lois Holzman



I'm a play revolutionary. I believe that play can revolutionarily transform the world and all of its people. Why do I say revolutionarily transform instead of change the world? Because play doesn't merely change us; it transforms us. Change adds or subtracts – it has to do with quantity. Transformation 'changes everything' – it has to do with quality. It makes what is into something qualitatively new. It's – in a word – revolutionary!

Way back when, we played – and it changed everything. We played at speaking and walking before we knew how to speak or walk, and that's how come we became speakers and walkers. Our caregivers helped us (they played right along with us) and they absolutely loved us for it and cheered us on. They helped us play at being 'bigger' and older and more skilled than we actually were. And together, we transformed ourselves and our families.

At its best (its most developmental and transformative – and revolutionary), play is movement. When we move, we get a new perspective. Take two steps and what you see is different from what you saw seconds ago. Walk your usual running path and you'll have a new perspective. Strike a power pose as you enter your boss' office and you'll have a different perspective on the conversation you're about to have.

When we play, we move about and around what's there in our surroundings and in how we feel, see and experience. We can see old things in new ways and we can see new things, things we've never seen before (try dancing with your partner when you get home instead of talking about what to do for dinner). We discover what's always been there. We create new ways to feel, new ideas and beliefs. We discover and create what we're made of.

Play gives us permission to be other than who we are in 'real life.' It allows us to imagine ourselves as being, feeling and doing different. Just as little children pretend to be fantastical characters or Mommy and Daddy, and older ones imagine themselves into basketball or tennis greats and the next Beyoncé or Adele, we adults can and should

create ways of playing that require us to step out of our usual roles and identities. To move about and around those roles and identities.

Play gives us permission to creatively imitate those more skilled than we are at something. Babies don't become speakers by studying a grammar book or dictionary. They play with words and sounds. They imitate others. Ditto adults beginning to sing, wind surf and play chess. We play at being others; we do what we see them doing (usually with their help and blessing). But since it's us doing it and not them, it becomes uniquely ours and we become singers and wind surfers and chess players.

Play helps us belong. Belonging helps us move about and around feeling alone, isolated, victimized. Playing is how we become part of existing communities – the human community, first and foremost, and the thousands of communities, large and small, that humans create. What communities have you become part of through transforming yourself into a member of that community, by imagining yourself as a competent member and creatively imitating others, in other words, by playing at being a member before you knew how?

Play is also how we create new communities. There's something very special about belonging to a community or a group that you were part of creating, that didn't exist before, that got built through you and others working and playing together. You not only have the community but you also have new kinds of relationships with your fellow builders, relationships nurtured and supported by the very community you built! Now, that's transformative!

There's something magical about imagining, performing, pretending your way into a new skill, a new character, a new way to feel. I love improv as a particular form of play for this reason. With a mere suggestion of a place two people might be, you and your scene partner immediately transport yourselves to Mars or the year 2050 or the Winter Olympics, playing off each other to create the characters, plot and the scene on the spot. It's a wonderful feeling to end to wild applause.

Improv also helps you become a better listener and have more intimate and creative conversations. Which is one of the reasons it's become so popular. The basic rule of improv is "Yes, and..." – "yes" meaning accept the offer, "and" meaning build with/add to it. (Improv doesn't work if your partner says, "It's warmer than I thought it would be here on Mars" and you respond, "We're not on Mars"). These days, everyone's doing improv – Alan Alda lends his hand to teaching improv to scientists, major teaching hospitals use improv to improve doctor-patient relations, foreign language teachers learn improv to radically transform their classrooms, businesses hire professional improvisers to help build better work teams. And thousands of just plain folks take improv classes for self-improvement and because it's a lot of fun. Google and you're sure to find them. In New York City, where I live, it seems a new school pops up every month.

As a play revolutionary I invite people to play with anything and everything in their lives. That's because for me play is more about the how than the what, it has to do with how you do the things you do. It generates choices: you can go to work, hang out with friends, do chores, study, have an argument, and so on, in the way you typically do (as who you "are") or you can engage in these life activities playfully, that is, inviting the transformative movement of becoming-ness.

Lois Holzman is a passionate advocate for tools and practices that empower people to transform the alienation and passivity of our culture. A pioneer of a new "psychology of becoming" that incorporates play, performance, improvisation and practical philosophy to inspire life-long human development, her work builds on that of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

