

Honor Your Playfulness

Keynote Address

North Carolina Honors Association Conference
Lloyd International Honors College
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
October 7, 2016

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I don't like labels and so one of the things I play around with is what to call myself. I used to say I'm a developmental psychologist, since that's what I was trained to be. But developmental psychology is an academic discipline that studies people and explains them in ways I have some big problems with. So I started to call myself a developmentalist to highlight that I try to help people develop and grow. I also sometimes say I'm an activity-ist since it's human activity and not behavior that I am interested in and want to foster. Lately I've been saying I'm a play revolutionary. Now you might find it strange to put those two words together. But they're more similar than you think. Both play and revolution transform what is into something qualitatively different.

As a play revolutionary, I believe that play can revolutionarily transform the world and all of its people. I want to share with you what I think play is and what about it makes it so powerful that I make this claim. First though, let me bring it closer to home for you—the reason I invited all of you to Honor Your Playfulness.

To begin, let's take a look at the little surveys you filled out. Let's hear from each table how you responded to the first question: "Do you think play has an opposite? If you do, what is it?" (people share their responses)

Until recently if I had to come up with an opposite of play I would say it's what learning has become in our rigid, structured, test-driven elementary, middle and high school classrooms. There's no play there. Even at the university level, play tends to be separated out into sports and the theatre department.

But I found what I think is the real opposite of play when I was reading a book by the anthropologist and pioneer play researcher Brian Sutton-Smith. Here's what he says:

“The opposite of play is not a present reality or work. It is depression.”

This is a very heavy statement, especially so when so many experts are telling us there’s an epidemic of depression in the US, including among college students. Depression, along with anxiety, hopelessness and loneliness are the most frequent feelings college students report, according to about a dozen national surveys done by associations of university and college counseling centers, college health services, and the American Psychological Association. And the number has risen dramatically in the last ten years—with 35-45% of college students currently reporting these as reasons they sought help.

So, let me share my thoughts on how play can transform the world—including how it can help us move about and around depression, anxiety, hopelessness and loneliness. Did you notice that that I said transform and not change? That’s 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. And that’s revolutionary!

When we welcome babies into our world

They learn-play
seamlessly and
continuously all
day long

They play with
everyone and
everything



We’re all here tonight because we played our way into becoming who we are today. Way back when, we were babbling, crawling little babies. 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—or as one of my heroes, the early 20th century psychologist Lev Vygotsky, says — as if we are “a head taller” than we are.



“In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were **a head taller** than himself. In this sense, play is a major source of development.”

Lev Vygotsky

This phrase—a head taller—captures how and why human beings develop and learn—because we are not only who are at any given moment or age or stage of life. We are also other than who we are. **We are simultaneously who we are AND who we are becoming.** We are babies who can’t speak a language AND—through play—we are speakers.

To summarize so far, play is how babies develop because:



This playful way of being in the world with others is something that all of us, at any age, can do. But most of us stop. It's not our fault. A bias against play is deep in our culture. We're taught that play is frivolous. That there's a difference between learning and playing—and that learning is what matters. We're told constantly who we are—and that limits who we can become. We focus on getting it right and looking good—and that stops us from developing. Without play, we get stuck. Individuals get stuck. Families get stuck. Communities get stuck. Nations get stuck. Indeed, these days the whole world appears stuck in old roles, stale performances, destructive games, and emotional turmoil.

Being stuck in standing still. To get unstuck, we have to move. And play is **MOVEMENT**. In physical space, in time, **and in the always becoming-ness of our lives**. When we move, we get a new perspective. Turn your head 90 degrees 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 walk into a job interview and you'll feel different about 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. Walk into your house or dorm room backwards and you'll see it in a new way. Try dancing with your brother or sister or roommate when you get home instead of mumbling hello. We discover what's always been there. We create new ways to feel, new ideas and new 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.

Here’s what an 8-year old girl said about her experience in a play and performance program run by the All Stars Project in NYC:

“Playing and performing brings out another side to you. You’ll be hanging out with your friends. You’re cool like that. But when you come here, it’s like a totally different thing. You’re a totally different person. You can pretend to be your mother, you can be anybody and you see a whole new side of you that you never saw before. You have a bigger personality, you express more.”

Play can transform the most hostile of relationships—even that between the police and people of color.

Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids



This is a scene from Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids—a program of the All Stars Project that the New York Police Department officially incorporated into the training of its police officers in 2011. Here’s a group of police officers and young people creating an improv scene on a trivial topic—on this day it was pets—that has nothing to do with the tensions between them. Right before, they were walking around in slow motion, making funny faces at each other and talking in gibberish. After being silly and awkward with each other like this, the cops and kids sit down and talk. They tell each other what’s hard about being a cop and what’s hard about being a kid. They discover that what’s hard is the same—worrying you won’t come home alive. They also tell each other how they wish the cops would treat them and how they wish the kids would treat them. The cops and kids are creating new performances of themselves and of their relationship. They can see each other in new ways, not in their cop and kid social roles. It’s play that allows them to experience each other as human beings, and to create more choices of how to act the next time they encounter each other in the streets.

Play gives us permission to “cheat”—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. The same for the rest of us—whether you’re beginning to sing, learning to study, speaking in public or making friends on campus. We play at being others. We do what we see them doing (hopefully with their help and encouragement). But since it’s US doing it and not them, it becomes uniquely ours and we become singers and college students and public speakers and friends.

Play helps us belong. Belonging helps us move about and around feeling alone, isolated and 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. Think of the communities you’ve 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.



The 2008 earthquake in Sichuan province was devastating. 70,000 people died, ½ million were injured, and 7 million people were left homeless. Two years later, even as houses and schools and hospitals had been rebuilt, lives were still in shatters. Children and adults were still dealing with trauma and loss. China’s largest NGO took an unorthodox approach to giving aid. They knew that children spend all their time either in school or studying, and that the destruction and loss added to their already high stress level. So they brought me and my colleagues to the city of Deyang to teach primary school teachers how to play. The idea was for us to help the teachers develop a play break they could use in their classrooms each day. When we met them, the teachers told us they hadn’t played since they were 2 or 3 years old. They had forgotten how. They were scared to try.

It’s 2 days later and the teachers you see are one group that performed the play break they created—which incorporated ways of playing we taught them and ways of playing from their childhoods that came flooding back in a sea of memories. All the teachers had transformed from shy adults who couldn’t remember having played as children and were terrified at the thought, to playful adults who remembered all kinds of games and gave expression to a new sense of confidence in using play with their students. They were joyous at their transformation, telling us, “We did what we thought was impossible,” “We learned who we are through creating together;” and “Now I can truly support the children.”

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!

Here are two teenagers sharing their new understanding of community after participating in play and performance programs:

"I've learned that community doesn't necessarily mean people who are like you. It's people who you do something with."

"Before, community for me was just the people who live in your neighborhood. But I don't know anyone in my neighborhood really. We moved there three years ago and one of the few people I got to know moved. Now I think that community isn't who you live with, it's who you interact with."

Play can feel like riding on a magic carpet. One minute your feet are solidly on the ground and the next you're soaring. There's something magical about imagining, performing, pretending your way into a new skill, a new character, a new way to feel, a new way to relate to other people. I love improv as a particular form of play for this reason. With a mere suggestion of a place people might be, you and your scene partners immediately transport yourselves to Mars or the year 2050 or the Winter Olympics, playing off each other to create the characters, the plot and the scene on the spot. When you end the scene to wild applause, you might wonder, "How did that happen? I didn't know we could do that!" It's a wonderful feeling.

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 therapists and counselors involve their clients in improv groups to help them deal with social anxiety. And thousands of just plain folks take improv classes for self improvement and because it's a lot of fun.

Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids and the work we did with teachers in China are just two examples of the hundreds I'm aware of where people play with the "hard stuff" of life. 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*. **Play has to do with how we do the things we 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.**

So see if you can play around with play during this conference. Dr. Ali and I will be here to help and support you. And if you’d like more information—videos to watch, things to read—about theories of play, the many kinds of play people are doing in the US and around the world, about the play and performance activism movement, about the activities of my Institute, please take my card and send me an email.

Want to play around with play? Here are some sources.

Institutions and Organizations

The Strong (National Museum of Play) in Rochester NY

<http://www.museumofplay.org/about>

The National Institute for Play

<http://www.nifplay.org>

The Upright Citizens Brigade

<https://www.ucbtheatre.com>

The Second City

<http://www.secondcity.com>

Performance of a Lifetime

<http://performanceofalifetime.com>

Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science

<http://www.centerforcommunicatingscience.org/improvisation-for-scientists/>

Improv Science

<http://improvscience.org>

All Stars Project, Inc.

<http://allstars.org>

Performing the World

<http://www.performingtheworld.org>

Videos

TEDXNavesink: Play
(site of a dozen talks)

<http://tedxnavesink.com/play/>

Play Helps Us Grow at Any Age

Lois Holzman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4sdVE0Q9Lk>

Play is More than Just Fun

Stuart Brown

https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital?language=en

Performing the World 2007

<http://www.performingtheworld.org/past-conferences/2007-2/video-ptw-2007>

Approaching Autism Theatrically

Stephen Volan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN1bKV5nxy0>

Books

Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art

Stephen Nachmanovitch

<http://www.amazon.com/Free-Play-Improvisation-Life-Art/dp/0874776317>

Vygotsky at Work and Play

Lois Holzman

https://www.amazon.com/Vygotsky-Work-Play-Lois-Holzman/dp/1138937851/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1476065118&sr=8-2&keywords=vygotsky+at+work+and+play

Deep Play

Diane Ackerman

<http://www.amazon.com/Deep-Play-Diane-Ackerman/dp/0679771352>

Performance Breakthrough: A Radical Approach to Success at Work

Cathy Salit

<http://www.amazon.com/Performance-Breakthrough-Radical-Approach-Success/dp/0316382485>

Unscripted Learning: Using Improv Activities across the K-12 Curriculum

Carrie Lobman & Matthew Lundquist

https://www.amazon.com/Unscripted-Learning-Improv-Activities-Curriculum/dp/0807747971/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1476111250&sr=8-1&keywords=unscripted+learning

