

The Importance of Play in Creativity

Patty Van Dyke, 2005

Play is an interesting topic these days. We have gone from the attitude expressed in The Unhurried Child, 1981, where free time and room for imagination was encouraged, to a new milieu where parents are highly structuring their children's free time, hoping to keep them out of early exposure and use of drugs, alcohol and sex, hoping to keep them safe. For many children, play is defined as competitive sports or hand held video games. Both parents are usually working. There is little time for adult play. In Webster's Collegiate Dictionary we find half a page of definitions for the word "play", only a few of which relate to play as we will consider it in this paper. The definitions that appealed to me were: recreational activity, especially the spontaneous activity of children; absence of serious or harmful intent; free or unimpeded motion; frolic; to deal in a light, speculative or sportive manner. What in the world can this have to do with creativity? Let's see if we can clarify this by observing a small child at play. Then we will relate what we notice to what we know about the creative process.

When you begin to observe a small child at play one of the first things you notice is that play may begin with no agenda. The child is not checking off a list or following the rules. There is some wandering and searching for what is appealing, what strikes a chord, what may look interesting right now. When my children were little and would tell me they were bored I would say, "How great – you're just about to think of something wonderful to do!" The child may dump the toy basket or search through familiar materials. Often things appear to be chosen rather haphazardly. Little children may put things together that we think don't "fit". They are curious about many combinations. There is delight in this, and sensory appeal – things are explored for texture, smell, taste and sound – everything is tasted, shaken, or pounded like a drum. An idea may occur – spontaneously or through adult modeling – and some focus emerges. Children work hard, with intent absorption. There is repetition, often in the "wrong" direction – which drives the grown-up nuts! There is no apparent sense that what the child is attempting is not possible, no visible worrying about failure. Children believe they can do whatever they set out to do - stack the blocks, catch the cat, climb the tree. They are dauntless. They take breaks and lie on the grass and look at the clouds, play with the dirt, stop and suck their thumb. And when they are done, they are done. When it's their choice, they leave an activity easily when it has run its course, whether through frustration or mastery. If it has gone well they are deeply satisfied. It may result in a product or not. They move on to something else and will come back later. This vignette suits the basic idea of play that I am interested in – room to explore freely, no external agenda, time for repetition and rehearsal, intrinsically satisfying.

Creativity is more than problem solving or doing an art project. It is about honoring the imagination, letting it in, listening to it; sometimes following its siren song. It is in the imaginal realm, between reality and fiction, that play occurs. It is an approach to life that allows us to use our whole selves, mind, body and spirit. It is an integrative principle. So, how can we apply the aspects of play to our lives in ways that will increase our creativity? When we understand the creative process as an organic and integrative system this begins to make sense. Creativity demands some wool gathering time, some down time. Time without an agenda other than exploration or inspiration is the

beginning. Time for things in process to cook on their own, time for something to catch our eye. Allow the images surrounding you, both internal and external, to have a voice. Go look at art work, lie on the beach, dialogue with your dreams. Notice what appeals to you, what you like and don't like. The child's willingness to do this opens the door to particular ideas, new projects. When something clicks, stick with it – persevere. Don't judge it, just do it. You will discover what it's worth as you go along. Take enough time to really know something, without, perhaps, knowing what it's for. Trust that what attracts you is worthwhile to do. Children are propelled by their developmental drives. They don't doubt that it is important, and possible, to learn all about mud and sand. They are delighted when they make something new – *new to them*. It's a joyful, satisfying discovery. It doesn't have to be new for the planet, just new to them. Could we get rid of our grandiosity – of how important our works of art need to be? How can we keep that sense of purpose and confidence, separate from the weight of the outcome, alive as we mature?

Sharing is an interesting aspect of play. Young children do what we call parallel play – working intently side by side. As they emerge from toddlerhood, real playing together begins to occur. Let us honor that focus, and the knowledge that I must master this myself, that this is my work to do. It's ok to want it for ourself and delight in it. As we gain mastery and confidence sharing comes more easily. And true sharing is always there, based on delight – the toddler offering you his half eaten cookie, wanting you to clap with him as she listens to Sesame Street or stands alone. There is something about allowing an idea or project to simmer in the dark, to keep it to ourselves for a while, that is an important part of the creative process. Things come together slowly, we are often waiting for the missing link without knowing what it may be. But we will feel cheated if someone else jumps in and supplies it for us. Good coaches and teachers are hard to find, but children intuitively know them and make a beeline for them. Children are “coachable” or willing to learn when their own way of learning is known and respected. Let us look carefully for mentors, picking them by our heart, rather than by their resume. We often complain about children's natural egocentricity and love of the limelight. We work hard to help them become socially appropriate. But isn't there something delicious about children's pride in their work, in their growing sense of competency? We, too, need to savor all the steps along the way; it is part of what keeps us going. Let's not be quite so focused on the end product as we go along. Celebrating progress step by step is helpful.

Letting go is often more difficult for adults than children. Sometimes it is because we have already suffered too much loss, or we don't believe the opportunity will happen again. And sometimes it is just because we're not done yet, we need more time. Often, adults will do nothing at all, or not let go of it at the end, if they are afraid they cannot or have not done it perfectly. Little children don't seem bothered by this at all. And it is scary and disheartening to see how quickly our school age children begin to let external standards and rules define their work and their satisfaction in it. Joan Anderson, in *A Walk by the Sea*, has Joan Erikson reminding us that “The opposite of *play* is *obey*.” How easily the shift occurs. Most adults quit drawing or doing any type of art by the third grade – the classroom artists take over. There is a mystique about art in our culture that assumes only the chosen few can do it and links creativity only with art. Let's reclaim a little of the joy of doing something for the fun of it. It's so much more satisfying. And

who knows what allowing that joy may lead to. It certainly helps keep energy and enthusiasm high! The other aspect of letting go that small children are good at is resting – they stop and lie down, suck their thumb or twist their hair. They take breaks. (This is different than taking naps!) They seem to have an inherent knowledge of their own rhythm and attention. They let things cook without attention. They let the unconscious inform them. Creativity is not served when we push too far beyond our available attention or energy. And children wake up and try again. They don't decide, "I failed yesterday, I'm never trying that again." Maybe they turn their foot out a little further when taking a step today. Things happen in the night, asleep, when we let go of them. Our minds and hearts work to put things together in a new way; our unconscious participates. Children at play simply allow that to happen. They rarely have to solve it all right now. They delight in things unfolding. Let's trust the process, and play!