



## Working, Not Working, and Not Working Any More

BY REV. BARBARA CHILD, RETIRED IN NASHVILLE, INDIANA

One fine day in San Francisco, nearly 35 years ago now, I found myself down on Mission Street, standing in line at the unemployment office. Not too many years earlier, as an attorney for the Legal Services Corporation, I had regularly represented people in their disputes with the unemployment office. And just days earlier, I had been the

director of legal writing and research at Golden Gate University School of Law.

None of that changed what it felt like to stand in that line. And nobody in the whole place cared a hoot that I had just moved out of a very nice office on almost no notice when the Dean of the Law School decided to solve his financial problem by not having a director of writing and research any more.

When a workaholic is suddenly out of work, when somebody who has measured the value of life mainly by accomplishments suddenly has nothing to do, this is quite an experience. Now I think perhaps my six-month stint of unemployment was some of the best education I ever had. And so a decade later, when I was studying at Starr King School, our Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, exploring whether I might be called to the ministry, I decided to have a hard look at the meaning of work—what makes work good or not, and what not working means.

I have been revisiting those times here lately, as I think of those who are going through a variety of transitions in their working lives, some on purpose, some not at all on purpose, and as I find myself revisiting my own ambivalences about retirement.

When I lived in Berkeley, California, the streets were filled with homeless people with no work. I wanted to know what their lives were really like, so I spent one morning a week for about a year at the Berkeley Jobs Consortium. Each week I helped some homeless, jobless person compose a resume to get work. They shared with me the memoirs of their working lives.

There is, of course, work that’s so hard that almost anyone would welcome not working as a rest from it. There’s work that, as the song by Sweet Honey in the Rock says, brings you more than a pay check—work that brings you asbestosis, perhaps, or carpal tunnel or back injury, or the possibility that you may be shot in the line of duty.

There’s work that does greater injury to the spirit than to the body. I think of the people on the assembly line who become extensions of the machines they operate, who aren’t even allowed to stop their numbing motion long enough to go to the bathroom.

But I also think of how differently people approach the same work. Studs Terkel’s classic book called *Working* is a collection of interviews of people in nearly every line of work you can think of. Side by side, we see the check-out clerk who hates the job and the one who loves it. We see the woman who waits tables in a restaurant with aching feet and heart hardened by too many encounters with nasty customers—and the waitress who thinks of herself gliding among the restaurant tables as if she were ballet dancing.

When I lived in Tampa, Florida, I learned the history of the cigar factories in the section of town called Ybor City. The people who sat in long rows rolling cigars saw their work as an art. Many could not read, but they listened all day to a highly revered “lector” (reader) who sat on a high platform and read to them not only the newspapers but also the literary classics. The lector was among the highest esteemed personages in the community, and the factory owners, who didn’t speak Spanish, wiped out the system when they caught on that the lectors were reading from communist newspapers and organizing the workers.

You may know the story of the three stone masons. Someone asks them what they

# Quest

Vol. LXXIV, No 4

September 2019

I like work:  
it fascinates me.  
I can sit and look at it  
for hours.

— Jerome K. Jerome

A monthly for religious liberals

### THINKING ABOUT WORK & PLAY

- WORKING, NOT WORKING, AND NOT WORKING ANY MORE  
*Barbara Child*
- DEEP PLAY  
*Sandra Fees*
- THE PATH OF PLAY  
*Alison W. Eskildsen*
- FULL-HEARTED PARENTING  
*Heather Christensen*
- PLAY, PEOPLE. JUST PLAY  
*Tandi Rogers*
- FROM YOUR MINISTER  
*Meg Riley*
- RESOURCES FOR LIVING  
*Lynn Ungar*
- I HEAR AMERICA SINGING  
*Walt Whitman*

are doing. The first one scowls and says: "I am laboring to break up this unbreakable rock." The second smiles and says: "I am earning a living for my family." The third stands up and puffs out his chest. "I am building a great cathedral for the glory of God," he says. We had better beware of hastily condemning some work as demeaning and lifting up other work as honorable.

---

## There is work for us all to do that is worthy, and we are all worthy of the work.

---

For good or for ill, many of us regard work as a kind of self-definition. Dorothee Sölle says that joblessness is a form of excommunication—being prevented from the communication that matters. Made solitary when we are not made to be solitary. It isn't true only of people who are fired or laid off. It may be true of people who retire as well.

My father worked for Goodyear Tire and Rubber for forty years before he retired. He knew nothing but his work and golf. He lived twenty more years, and golf became increasingly less fun for his aging body. He spent more and more time in front of the television set. I urged him to write his memoirs. Young business people could learn so much from his stories of corporate life. But he never did it. Sometimes I wish he had found himself in the unemployment line in his mid-40s.

But I hasten to say that retirement need not be like his. Not working, for whatever reason, need not be like it was for him. I also have in my memory's eye my partner Alan, in the years when he was no longer able to work but before Agent Orange and PTSD finally took their toll on him.

Alan had been a salesman after he returned from Vietnam. He could sell anything, and over the years just about did—pole barns, jewelry, advertising, shark jaws, pistols, pieces of eight. I believe he could have sold the Brooklyn Bridge if he had tried. I used to listen to him on the phone, taking care of business. Never hurried, never out

of sorts, no matter how he was feeling, no matter what kind of day it had been.

That was his "working." His "not working" was sitting on the dock, fishing, or not fishing. Or taking the canoe up the Santa Fe River before the sun went down. Maybe checking for the manatee at the mouth of the Ichetucknee River. Or having a ride in the old blue pick-up to Pope's Store, checking on the neighborhood. "Come on," he would say, "I want to show you something." And up at the corner, we would sit in the darkness and watch hundreds of lightning bugs. There was very little talking. Alan, those last years at the river, was able to just be.

Ram Dass says if you focus on doing instead of being, you burn out. It isn't the nature of the work that burns you out. If you regard your work as an experiment in truth, you do not burn out. Ram Dass also says you can work on yourself anywhere. You can work on yourself as easily at the phone company as at the ashram.

When I finally got a job after my six months of unemployment, I wrote about tax law for a legal publishing company. For the first time in my working life, I didn't take any work home. I started at 8:00 a.m. and left at 4:00 p.m., and I got to drive across the Golden Gate Bridge twice a day—in the opposite direction from all the traffic. If anybody ever tells you this life doesn't put temptation in our paths, don't you believe it. You understand—I abhor tax law, and I was making what felt like about five cents a month. But what did that matter?

It turned out to matter a great deal that the work didn't give me any obstacles to overcome. It didn't give me any resistance so that I could feel the strength of my being push against anything. It didn't bring me forth.

I compared my working life with that of my friend David, living on his old boat in the Sausalito harbor. He really did make very little money in his landscaping business. He would say when he got into somebody's yard, he felt like a musician getting ready to perform. He always wanted to get to know the people, to find out what colors and textures would reflect their style. David died a few years ago, but my memories of him are still fresh. I

can still picture him there, spending hours every day engaging people in conversation over coffee at the Café Trieste, walking along the docks and speaking to people as he went. He was one of the happiest people I ever knew.

The Book of Genesis would have us believe that work is our punishment for disobeying God, and that when we were banished from Eden we were doomed to labor. But some contemporary theologians say no, not so. Rather, the creation of the world is not finished, but continues day by day, and we are co-creators with God. Well, I don't know about either theory. But I know that my father was cursed in his not working, and my friend David was blessed in both his working and his not working.



And I know that some of the most important work we do nobody pays us a penny for. All the volunteering. All the work of the church. I know that the hard work we do on ourselves does not burn us out—the work to know ourselves, to make our relationships healthy, the grief work, the work to free ourselves from phobia or addiction. "It may be," as Wendell Berry says, "that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey."

It doesn't matter whether we are working or not working, or not working any more. There is work for us all to do that is worthy, and we are all worthy of the work. ■

Deep play is a form of tending to the spirit. We hope that through *Quest*, along with online worship, Facebook groups, [questformeaning.org](http://questformeaning.org) and our various other offerings, that the CLF provides a field where we can come together, play and explore. You can help keep this playground open by sending a check in the enclosed envelope, or by giving at [clfu.org/give](http://clfu.org/give). ■



## Deep Play

BY SANDRA FEES,  
MINISTER, FIRST  
UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST  
CHURCH OF BERKS  
COUNTY,  
READING,  
PENNSYLVANIA

Brian La Doone is a musher—a sled dog racer—in far northern Canada, which is polar bear country. He says he keeps a working distance of about 70 feet from the bears. His Canadian Eskimo sled dogs don't always do likewise. On one occasion La Doone warily witnessed a polar bear loping toward one of his sled dogs. The dog wagged his tail and bowed. This happened during a time when the polar bears were particularly hungry. The sea hadn't yet frozen and the bears couldn't reach the seals they typically hunted on the ice.

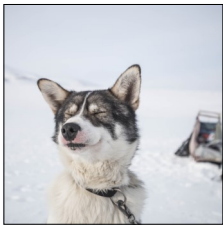
To La Doone's surprise, the two began to play, to frolic. They rolled

around and wrestled in the snow. They embraced and nipped at each other. The dog knew some-

thing La Doone didn't know. The bear had signaled its playful intent while it approached. The dog in turn had signaled its playful intent. The bear actually returned every day for the next week to romp with the dog. And then, when the ice finally thickened enough, the bear headed off for its hunting ground.

What possessed the polar bear to want to play with the dog rather than making a meal of him? Why did the dog take the risk? Why did these two unlikely creatures become playmates? Why?

Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughn relate this story in their book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul*. The title of the book pretty much tells the story on play, which is as vital to true aliveness as breath is to being alive. Children and animals know this. They engage in play naturally. If left to their own devices, they play. That's



what they do. They intuitively and instinctively play. For adults, play too often comes to be seen as a waste of time, goofing off, or something to do in our spare time. At best, we set aside time for play—times of the day or week or year. The Protestant work ethic, our culture of busyness and drive for achievement, keep a tight grip on us. Many of us are frantically trying to keep up with the day-to-day demands of work, family and household. There is a constant urge and encouragement to demonstrate our worthiness and productivity. We need to get things done. And church can sometimes feel that way too. “Go for a walk” or “take a vacation” get added to the bottom of a to-do list.

The lack of play is no longer just an adult concern. There's increasing evidence that children are becoming play deprived. Parents are often the ones most aware of this. Ironically, research suggests that the adults most worried about their children's lack of play are also the ones most likely to lack play in their own lives. Parents, take note. The solution is obvious. Start playing more yourself.

The greatest danger in play deprivation may not be obvious at first. It may just seem like life is a little less fun and a little more serious. But observing those who have stopped playing makes it clear that there are more troublesome repercussions. A person or animal that stops playing becomes disinterested in new activities. When play stops, it becomes hard to find pleasure in the world. When play stops, our creativity, adaptability and intelligence get thwarted.

The opposite also occurs. When animals and people stop finding pleasure in the world, they stop playing. Anyone who has a pet has witnessed this behavior. One of my cats was recently unwell. He was having what looked like seizures and overall lacked his usual pep. A vet visit and blood work revealed a urinary tract infection. He got an antibiotic shot. After only one day, he was bouncing around like he had springs in his feet, livelier than ever at age 14. Play puts an added bounce into our step. Brown and Vaughn point out that play also animates the mind and has physical, social, intellectual, and psychological

benefits. Play aids in survival. It makes us smarter and more adaptable. It makes us more creative and innovative. It fosters empathy and enables us to form complex social relationships and groups.

So it might be a good time to take a personal inventory of how exactly your play life is going. How much are you playing? Are you bringing a playful spirit to your work life, to your relationships, to worship? Is there a particular form of play you might engage in more often?

I've been reading a lot about play, and trying to practice it more. There are many benefits and attributes. I want to highlight just three that aren't immediately obvious.

---

### How much are you playing?

---

For one thing, the point of play is that it doesn't have a point. People who study play consistently name purposelessness as a central quality of play. In other words, play isn't goal-driven. You do it for the sake of the activity itself. Margaret Guenther, an Episcopal priest and spiritual director, says, “Play exists for its own sake. Play is for the moment; it is not hurried.” During play, there's a sense of timelessness.

As a child I loved anything artsy-craftsy—coloring, drawing, making things. At Sunday School and in regular school I got so absorbed in my projects that I lost track of time. I struggled with the time limits on arts and crafts projects. I wanted to keep on practicing “holy uselessness.” That's a phrase Guenther uses to describe this sense of purposelessness. She says in her book *Toward Holy Ground*:

*When we play, we also celebrate holy uselessness. Like the calf frolicking in the meadow, we need no pretense or excuses. Work is productive; play, in its disinterestedness and self-forgetting, can be fruitful.*

Similarly, Stuart Brown says, “[Play] doesn't have a particular purpose, and that's what's great about play. If its purpose is more important than the act



of doing it, it's probably not play.”

That's a great distinction. I can't tell you how often I have tried to multitask my play time. If I go running to lose weight or be healthy, that's great. But it's probably not play. It's possible it will become play while I'm running, but maybe not. On the other hand, if I run just for the sheer sake of running, for its own sake, for the pleasure of it, that's play.

A second striking aspect of play is that it is deep. Soul level deep. It has its own reality. It runs counter to cultural norms, rules, and expectations. Maybe that's part of what scares and thrills us about it. In her book *Deep Play*, author and poet Diane Ackerman says:

*One sheds much of one's culture, with its countless technical and moral demands, as one draws on a wholly new and sense-ravishing way of life.... We can lay aside our sense of self, shed time's continuum, ignore pain, and sit quietly in the absolute present, watching the world's ordinary miracles.... When it happens we experience a sense of revelation and gratitude.*

Deep play invites us to give up control, give up certainty, and give up our preconceived ideas and rules. That's because play arises from deep within us, not from the world's standards for us. It is an authentic expression of self. Play taps into our own creativity and innovation. Special equipment and fancy toys can actually get in the way. They can suppress the inner expression of self, rather than cultivating it.

Religion is the third quality of play I want to talk about. Diane Ackerman writes: “Deep play ... reveals our need to seek a special brand of transcendence, with a passion that makes thrill-seeking [understandable], creativity possible, and religion inevitable.” Religion may seem an unlikely playground. So often we think of religion as being stiff, boring, structured, dogmatic, and serious. That has a lot to do with the kind of religious upbringing and experiences we've had. I don't think of our Unitarian Universalist reli-



gion as stiff or boring. And we certainly aren't dogmatic. But too much focus sometimes gets placed on church “work” rather than church “play.”

UUs can be a driven group of people who want to save the world. That's part of the reason for religion. But we do well to remember that play helps us do that even better. Play helps build the beloved community we long for. It deepens relationships, builds bridges across our differences, promotes belonging, grows our souls, and cultivates harmony and love.

---

### Play and wonder go hand in hand. Play renews the spirit. Play opens us to creative forces.

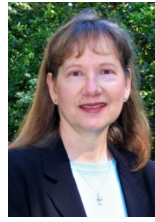
---

Our Unitarian Universalist principles and sources don't mention play. Not explicitly, anyway. But the first and sixth sources of our faith are suggestive of play. The first source draws on the “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to forces that create and uphold life.” Play and wonder go hand in hand. Play renews the spirit. Play opens us to creative forces. The sixth source draws on “earth-centered teachings which celebrate the sacred circle of life.” To celebrate the circle of life is to sing, play musical instruments, tell stories, enact pageants, share in rituals, share our joys and our sorrows, hear poetry, pray, and meditate. Through these and other forms of play, Unitarian Universalism calls us back to ourselves, to holy uselessness, to the spontaneous expression of true self where creativity, joy, and gratitude abound.

What would it hurt if we were to be more playful in all we do—whether at church, at home, at work? Perhaps if we let go of a bit of our usefulness and purpose we could step into another realm that was more creative, more joyful, more deeply and truly religious. Which might turn out to be our life's purpose after all. ■

## The Path of Play

BY ALISON WILBUR ESKILDSEN, PARISH MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP OF ATHENS, GEORGIA



Psychologist David Elkind, in his book *The Power of Play*, identifies several characteristics of play, including:

1. No worry of failure—whether you win or lose doesn't matter.
2. Balance between challenge and skill—some risk heightens the experience, but not so much that known talents can't be relied upon.
3. Action and awareness merge—you're so involved you're on autopilot.
4. Self-consciousness disappears—you don't worry about how you look, if you're good enough, etc.
5. The activity is an end in and of itself—the doing is what matters, not any reward you get for it.

This experience of delight in the task itself is not just a luxury, it is a need.

We need the lightness of being that play creates to better face the fact that our lives will end in death—and what could be more absurd?

We need the lightness of being that play affords when we do the serious work of relieving, in whatever way we can, the hundreds of thousands around the world who are dying from disease, malnutrition, abuse, neglect, and war.

We need the lightness of being that play offers when bringing groups in conflict together so that bonds can be forged and new hope for peace and healing encouraged.

We need the lightness of being that play brings to young Black men feeling hopeless, police officers feeling under attack and undocumented immigrants fearfully hiding.

We need play to face the work of the world.

We need play to maintain our emotional, spiritual, and physical balance so that we can do the work that desperately needs doing.

Come, let us play, even as we work. ■



## Full-Hearted Parenting

BY HEATHER CHRISTENSEN, COMMUNITY MINISTER, BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON

Last year my therapist started asking me at every visit, “You having any fun?”

I’d laugh, and say, “Nope.”

Eventually, I realized that I just wasn’t any good at fun. Either I’d never learned, or I’d forgotten how to let loose, kick back, and have a blast doing something.

So I did what we do these days: I asked Facebook. My friends gave me all kinds of suggestions, and some of them actually sounded like things I might enjoy. In the time since then, I have had more fun. But lately, I’ve been thinking that question is a hard one for parents of young children.

Do you remember that Nyquil ad? The one that said, “Moms don’t take sick days”? (And yes, there was a dads version of that commercial. No non-binary parent commercial though.)

For the default parent, there are no sick days. There is no end to the work of child-tending, and every precious hour of respite care, should we be lucky enough to have that, is measured out carefully. We always ask ourselves, “Is this a good use of babysitter time?” There are always dishes and laundry, deadlines and past-due projects—so many things that seem more urgent than self-care of any kind, let alone play.

After five-plus years in the trenches, I’ve decided that there are only two ways that parents get to have fun.

Option one: convince yourself that fun belongs on your to-do list. That it’s not optional. That the well-being of your children depends on your ability to have fun. The oxygen-mask metaphor is so old that we roll our eyes at it, but it’s true. Play is as important as air and water and food and shelter. Without it, parts of us die.

Which leads us to option two: play with your children. I’m not just talking about getting down on the floor with them

and making elaborate racetracks. I’m not just talking about doing whatever the things are that your kids think are fun. Find the places where your joy and their joy overlap. For my partner Liesl, that’s the racetracks. For me, it’s art. It’s liberating to do kid art. The kids and I will sit at a table with a big piece of paper, a bin of crayons, and a timer. Every time the timer rings, we switch chairs, and color there. It’s so much fun—free of the constraints of needing to make “real art.”

Last weekend the kids and I went to something billed as a “Clay Extravaganza.” My daughter and I both tried our hands at a pottery wheel—and loved it. Then we watched skilled potters compete—competitions that were silly and serious at the same time. In the first one, a team of three potters worked together—one operating the pedal controlling the speed, and the other two each using one hand only, working cooperatively to draw the clay evenly upward. In the second one, seven potters sat at wheels—with paper bags over their heads, a silly face drawn on each bag. The timer started, and all but one created beautiful pieces. One potter, when she removed the paper bag, said, “That’s not at all what I was imagining!” The crowd’s favorite was the potter whose piece collapsed. I think he actually won.

Had I been alone, I would have loved to stay and watch more of the competitions. I would have taken longer to explore the exquisite works of art for sale.

But it was time for my son’s nap, so we packed up and went home. He had a snack, then went down easily for a long nap.

Did I want more? Maybe. But if I’d been alone, I would have missed seeing my daughter’s delight and mastery. If I’d been alone, I would have missed a lesson in saying, “It is enough. My heart is full.” And if I’d been alone I might have been drawn into judgements of good art and bad, or comparisons between my creations and those of the talented artists I was watching. But my children and I were able to stay with the spirit of art as play, and each of us and our relationships together came out stronger for it. ■



## Play, People. Just Play

BY TANDI ROGERS, MINISTER FOR THE UU PACIFIC WESTERN REGION

*The innocent mistake that keeps us caught in our own particular style of ignorance, unkindness, and shut-downness is that we are never encouraged to see clearly what is, with gentleness. Instead, there’s a kind of basic misunderstanding that we should try to be better than we already are, that we should try to improve ourselves, that we should try to get away from painful things, and that if we could just learn how to get away from the painful things, then we would be happy.*

- Pema Chodron

Self-improvement is perhaps the most common shared UU value. It’s implicit in our mission statements. Our adult religious education programs are soaked in it. But what if self-improvement wasn’t a core value? What if we didn’t aim at better, best, perfection? What would be left?

Maybe enough would be left. Maybe enough would make way for play. The *Webster’s Desk Dictionary of English Language* cites over 30 meanings of play. A common definition used among childhood experts is “an activity done for its own sake, characterized by means rather than ends (the process is more important than any endpoint or goal).”

Imagine the possible fall-out of Play as Spiritual Practice. No goals, no ends. Just joy, surrender, humility. The very spiritual maturity we try to manufacture in our self-improvement would simply arise out of our practice of play for its own sake. ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I've been learning about improv for about six years now. My first improv classes were pure play. "Get out of your minds," we were told each Tuesday, and we did. We let our imaginations take us down rivers, over rooftops, onto other planets, into nooks and crannies of relationships and dilemmas which were otherwise impossible to experience. I told friends it was like going to the best playground ever—where all the other kids said yes when you asked them to play!

My Tuesday teacher, also a psychology professor, allowed us to go where we would, coaching us from the sides to say yes, to lean into risk, to lean into the life of these scenes. I loved it. And then, because of a scheduling conflict, I had to switch to the Monday class, with a very bossy teacher who performs improv professionally full time. She frequently interrupts our play to show us better techniques, to teach us what she knows, to lecture us and to alter our behavior. "Use your mind!" she says. "The best improvisers never stop thinking." She drills us on improv rules and best practices constantly. We rarely do scene work that extends beyond a few minutes.

I first met her when she substituted in my Tuesday class, and I threw a little bit of a fit. "I come here for fun!" I told her. "And you are ruining it."



When I knew I'd have to switch to her class, I considered quitting improv altogether. But the thing is that I really do love it, and it was Monday or nothing in the "55 plus" class option. So I gritted my teeth and moved over. (I love doing improv with older people, and these classes are considerably cheaper than the general ones.)

What is the line between work and play? Is it applying rules and guidelines? Is it being interrupted, correct-

ed, challenged? What I know is that I have learned a tremendous amount on Mondays, but I'm no longer going to a playground, entering a spirit of open imagination to see what comes. I'm going to a classroom, and I'm enjoying what I am learning, but I am no longer open to the expansiveness which came with pure imagination.

---

**For me, there's nothing like a good playground, where all the other kids are nice and there are no cliques and everyone plays with everyone and greets new information or revelation with a yes.**

---

There is both gain and loss in this. This new classroom is more like "work," whereas the first one felt more like play. I'm also much better at improv than I used to be. Since I have no interest in the world in doing improv for any reason besides having fun, that's not as useful to me as it is to other folks in the class, who have begun performing themselves.

The Monday teacher tells us constantly how good we are at improv, how we can trust ourselves because we've been doing this for longer than almost any other students she knows. (Some of my classmates have been there for 12 or 14 years; my own six years makes me one of the newest students.) But she rarely trusts us to go onto the playground and mess around and find our own way. I've come to love and respect her, and I'll keep taking her class, but I really miss Tuesdays. The minute my schedule allows it, I'll be back over there.

For a while, before this schedule conflict, I was taking both classes. That was ideal for me. I could learn on Monday and practice on Tuesday, drawing from Monday's instruction to deepen and en-

rich the open play on Tuesday. I think I learned equally much on both days.

When my child, Jie, now 22, was four, we enrolled in a free, public, pre-Kindergarten class in the District of Columbia where we lived. The days there were profoundly more structured than Jie was accustomed to. We noticed Jie beginning to harden off and play less imaginatively, becoming more irritable and unhappy. Taking money we had hoped to save for college tuition, we pulled out of that school and put Jie into a cushy, well-funded private school where the pre-K kids pretty much did free play all day.

What I saw was that Jie learned just as much playing as working, the same thing I would say about myself in improv classes. Imagination can be a wonderful teaching tool, at least as good as lectures and workbooks and tasks. At some ages, it's really the only way to learn—as we get older, most of us find didactics more bearable if we want to attain the knowledge they impart. But even for those of us who are well along into adulthood and fully motivated, we still learn most efficiently and fully when our bodies as well as our minds are engaged, and when we have the opportunity to explore and create as well as passively receive information.

I know that people learn in all kinds of ways, and free play is only one of them. But for me, there's nothing like a good playground, where all the other kids are nice and there are no cliques and everyone plays with everyone and greets new information or revelation with a yes.

When I came to CLF as senior minister, my predecessor, Jane Rzepka, described it to me as "a really cool sandbox to play in." That's how it has felt to me these years—a playground where we can experiment and grow

and say yes to each other. Sure, there's work and the discipline of spiritual practice. But I truly treasure the openness of our sandbox in which we dig and discover and explore, welcoming all who want to play with us. ■







## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR,  
MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN  
LEARNING, CHURCH OF  
THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

“Do what you love,” the saying goes, “and you’ll never work a day in your life.” I figure this saying could go a couple of ways. One possibility is that if you spend your life doing work that you love, then all those work hours are a pleasure rather than a chore.

Now, I don’t know a single person whose work life doesn’t include doing at least some percentage of tedious grunt work, but there’s a lot to be said for loving your work. I say that as someone who has what is possibly the best job in the world. I’m a minister who gets to enjoy preaching and connecting with members of the congregation, but doesn’t have to worry about fixing the boiler or whether the chairs got properly arranged in the sanctuary. I’m also a religious educator who gets to write curricula and other materials for families, without having to worry about getting, storing and cleaning up craft supplies. I work with people I genuinely like and admire, using skills I’ve worked hard to hone.

I am incredibly, ridiculously lucky, and I certainly know that work that doesn’t feel like work is a rare and wondrous thing. I’m also keenly aware that “Do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life” could have a completely different meaning. If you only do what you love, you might never find work at all.

I say this as the mother of a 20-year-old who is following her dreams and trying to make it as a professional dancer. Never working a day at her passion might be something of an overstatement, but the money for doing what she loves is pretty darn limited, and days of paid work as a dancer are few and far between. As her mother I’m enormously proud of her commitment to doing what she

loves, but there’s also a protective maternal part of me that would love to see her go to school to train for some field of work that might not be as big a passion as dancing, but would be more fulfilling and more lucrative than the kinds of jobs she’s working to make ends meet as she pursues dance.

We humans, I think, need both work and play. We need to be able to support ourselves, and our dependents if we have any. We want to feel that we are responsible, contributing members of society—and our society is all too quick to define our responsibility and our usefulness in terms of what we do for work. But we also need play. We

---

**We need things that lift  
us beyond the ordinary,  
that feed our souls and  
bring us deep joy.**

---

need things that lift us beyond the ordinary, that feed our souls and bring us deep joy. We might work very hard at those things that feel like play—my daughter, for instance, has twice-weekly dance classes that run for five hours. That’s a whole lot of intense mental and physical effort! But the joy, the experience of “flow,” of being caught up in something that takes you beyond yourself, can turn even enormous effort into play.

Now, some of us are blessed to encounter bits of that experience of “flow,” or play, in the course of our work lives. And if you can find your way into work that allows you to play, that’s an amazing gift that I highly recommend.

But we all know that a lot of work is just work—we do what we need to do to pay the bills, and if the bills get covered, well, that’s a good month. But I heard a podcast the other day—I think it was *Freakonomics*—that really made me think about work, and what we get out of it. They talked about a study in which researchers interviewed people who did a variety of different jobs about the meaning they found in their work. What I most remember is that they talked with people who worked

cleaning rooms in a large hospital. And they asked about whether these folks thought anyone with the physical strength and stamina could do their job. And a lot of folks said yes, that theirs was a low-skill, boring job that pretty much anyone could do. But some percentage of the respondents were clear that what they brought to the job was special, and that people who could do what they did were rare. And it turns out they were right.

The people who felt they brought something unique to their job didn’t think of what they were doing as simply cleaning rooms—they were attending to the needs of vulnerable, hurting people. They were caring for patients whose lives were made better by the direct comfort provided by the custodial staff. And these workers found both meaning and interest in bringing imagination as well as compassion to their work. One woman, for instance, went so far as to regularly rearrange the artwork on the walls of a patient who had been non-responsive for weeks. She couldn’t know what, if anything, the patient was aware of, but she figured that if you were aware, and couldn’t turn your head, it would be better to have some variety in what you are able to see. Not everyone brings that kind of caring and creativity to their work, and this custodian was justifiably proud of what she brought to her job.

Now, finding meaning in your work isn’t really the same thing as finding play. But it isn’t entirely unrelated. Even the things we do for play—sports or playing music or making art—involve a lot of repetition of small tedious drills or tasks.



But we can sink ourselves into those tasks with gratitude because they are a part of something that we have chosen, something that we delight in, something that feels meaningful. At work or at play, we are people who have chosen the path of the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” We build meaning as we go,



Church of the Larger Fellowship  
Unitarian Universalist

24 Farnsworth Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

Address Service Requested

NONPROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
BOSTON, MA  
PERMIT NO. 55362

You can listen to audio recordings of *Quest Monthly*, read back issues or get electronic versions of the text to share with friends (and much more) at [questformeaning.org](http://questformeaning.org)

**Quest Monthly Editorial Team:** Adrian Graham, Stefan Jonassen, Kat Liu, Niala Terrell-Mason, Meg Riley, Arliss Ungar, Lynn Ungar, editor, Heide Cottam, design, Beth Murray, production coordinator

Copyright 2019 Church of the Larger Fellowship. Generally, permission to reproduce items from *Quest Monthly* is granted, provided credit is given to the author and the CLF. ISSN 1070-244X

**CLF Staff:** Meg Riley, senior minister; Jody Malloy, executive director; Lynn Ungar, minister for lifespan learning and *Quest Monthly* editor; Rodney Lemery, minister of Worthy Now Prison Network; Lori Stone Sirtosky, director of technology; Beth Murray, program administrator; Judy DiCristofaro, fiscal administrator; Andrea Fiore, webmaster.

**Learning Fellows:** Margalie Belizaire, Antonia Bell-Delgado, Shae, Jennifer Johnson and Eli Snider

Web Site [www.clfuu.org](http://www.clfuu.org) — Email [clf@clfuu.org](mailto:clf@clfuu.org) — Toll-Free Line 800-231-3027 or 617-948-6150

CLF Jewelry at *inSpirit*, The UU Book and Gift Shop 800-215-9076

CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston MA 02210-1409 USA



## I Hear America Singing

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,  
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,  
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,  
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,  
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,  
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,  
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,  
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,  
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

By **Walt Whitman**, from *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855.



