PLAY AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE
Delivered by the Rev. Vivienne H. Chapman, At the UU Meeting House of Chatham, MA
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FIRST READING -- MARCH 22, 2009
As I begin, let me assure you that this story does have a place in today's service. As you will learn, the game described has several essential aspects of play, whether play is in the courtroom, the tennis court or on the playground. The image of children "just playing" often calls to the adult mind a group of kids running, jumping and laughing in a random way, with no connection to each other. As you will see, however, play usually includes being in a designated space, carefully defined, having a final goal, and rules that only apply for the period of play.

When I was young, in the summer, during school vacation, groups of neighborhood children playing across age groups, ranging from eight through 14, joined in our play. One favorite game was called "Mother, May I?" In this game, a large, narrow rectangle is marked out, with one end usually at the large tulip poplar tree in our side yard. The tree was the goal, where the person who was "It" stood. Stretching behind it, and a short distance on each side of the tree, was the playing field. All the players except "It" stood at the back end of this space, facing the tree when the game began, the starting line. To begin the game, It faced the tree, closed his/her eyes, and counted to ten. The speed at which she counted was up to her, but the others had to hear each number. It sounded like this: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10 STOP! While she counted, the other players walked forward towards the goal. Absolute running was not allowed. When she shouted STOP, she turned around and opened her eyes. If anyone was still moving, he had to go back to the starting line. Since the laws of momentum meant that even walking too fast made it hard to stop instantly, it was prudent for each player to gauge how fast it was safe to move. Standing on one leg for the next part of the game was painful.

The next part was crucial. "It," the Leader, would say, for example, to each player in turn, "Jane, you may take three baby steps." (The choice was baby steps, medium steps, or giant steps.) Before the player moved, she had to say: "Mother, May I?" If she forgot to do so, she had to go back to the starting line. Players advanced, one way or another, until the first player reached goal, and a new game could begin. Having to say, "Mother, May I?" the directions of the Leader and each player's ability to follow the rules made each game different, and encouraged further play.

SERMON
So you thought that only children play? After the reading from Johan Huizinga, perhaps you have been reminded that play is all around us, in many more places than I can possibly discuss in a short sermon. It may be useful to begin by describing some distinguishing aspects of play, adult and children's alike, however seriously it is taken. Defining play itself proves to be a slippery problem. After writing numerous comments, Huizinga notes that play resists a simple definition, much more difficult than finding evidences of it everywhere in our culture – or any culture.

Here, however, are some universal characteristics of play discussed by Huizinga, illustrated in our story of "Mother, May I?" First of all, play always involves a special quality of freedom; it is always a voluntary activity, and all the players agree to its guidelines. It takes place outside of normal time and activities. The players of "Mother, May I" leave normal time, and play in a time focused only on the game, its steps to the goal, and its leader. When they finish, normal time starts again. You can say the same about a game of tennis, or a courtroom trial. Next, it is played in a designated space - Remember the tulip poplar and the starting line? This designated space is essential, and sometimes for adults becomes sacred space. There are always rules, although the group which is playing may at times, substitute rule changes to fit a temporary concern. For instance, the distance between the goal and the starting line may be changed to fit the age of the players that day. There is generally a contest involved in play, and a game often ends with a winner. In "Mother, May I" the winner is the player who reaches the tree (goal) first. Note that the game is kept interesting by the skills of the leader in choosing who can

move farther, and by the players' mistakes in failing to ask the key question – Mother, May I?: then taking steps without permission, therefore being required to return to the starting line.

Play also requires the use of imagination and creative ideas. These qualities, employed so easily by young children, are essential to the success of adult play. Most adults do not take child's play seriously, although the playing children always do, whatever laughter is generated during play. How does this play, apparently insignificant to the observer, become crucial, often serious play in the adult world? What triggers the change? Huizinga suggests that what actually happens is a continuum from quite trivial play of young children to the most serious employment of play in the adult world.

He urges us to look back to most ancient times, when primitive man, with other animals such as otters and dolphins, along with most young of mammals, engage in long periods of play. One obvious use of play in the young is to practice skills needed to be an adult. Children, however, go far beyond this type of play in many directions. Very often, with the superior thinking skills of humans, ancient adult play was employed in designing ritual and ceremonies, taking place within sacred space, deemed essential to making a pleasing connection to deities or a deity. As our many cultures developed, the varied uses of play extended from religious ceremonies to many other aspects of life. The trigger was the human mind, with its ability to know, to think, to imagine, and to create. As these activities grew more essential to the daily working of a culture, their connection to play has been ignored.

Throughout human history, the changing seasons, the withdrawal and return of daylight, of heat and cold, has been one focus of human celebrations, connected to play, to stories of the causes of the earth's changes, and to the essential reproduction of plants, animals, and young men and women. These elements are an ageless source of play and celebration, using music, dance, and poetry. Today, we happen to be observing the spring equinox, exactly halfway between darkest winter and brightest summer. Tension and joy, even today, come together as we mark these seasons. The tension of spring's coming, especially at a place like Cape Cod is palpable; my daffodil leaves are up today, but their arrival guarantees nothing, if we are expecting only warm weather the rest of the month!

Two significant aspects of play can be divided at this point. One, far too complex for this sermon, is the codification of what was "only" child's play into games of skill and subsequent contests, such as football or tennis or soccer; the law, with its benches and courts and opposing lawyers, vying to win a contest of wits; of war and "war games," of secret societies, of schools, and many other essentials of civilization.

The other aspect is the aesthetic use of play – not that some play in the first sense is not also aesthetic. This kind of play, while frequently a product of the mind "playing with" thoughts and ideas, also focuses on other elements. Let us look for a moment at music, an element which is important to our services of worship here in the Meeting House. Playing an instrument generally requires us to use a cleverly designed piece of wood and/or metal, on which the player must learn to create pleasing sounds in many keys, not always easy to do. There is, however, the human voice, with which one can learn to create song; even more marvelous is the choir, where a group of human voices blend their voices together to create a separate instrument. The word "play" is used in a dozen different ways when we speak of music, although some requisites of other kinds of play may be missing. Singing contests are still happening, but are not essential to making music. As humans, our musical abilities were used in ancient times to enhance religious ceremonies. Through the centuries, this connection has endured, although the exact way we have used it has changed, as successive groups have played with what music could do.

As our religious expression has changed, we have found ways to keep various musical forms, even when they are not exactly expressing our present religious ideas. We sing requiems like Mozart's, although for some of us our celebration of death no longer uses the words in the Mass. We use old music in our hymns, although we have written new words to sing. One fascinating gem is our "doxology" sung 400

years ago by the Puritans. Creative UU's have played with the words, and produced numerous ones, like the words to spring we sang today. As in any other adult play, the evolution of music over millennia has been the result of musicians who decided to "play with" the settled rules for singing and playing. It is hard to remember that Beethoven, in his day, was particularly innovative, to the point of horrifying many of his listeners.

Perhaps the closest aesthetic form to our spiritual life is that of poetry. Huizinga writes: " ….while the more highly organized forms of society – religion, science, law, war, and politics gradually lose touch with play, …. the function of the poet still remains fixed in the play-sphere where it was born. …. It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind." He describes this sphere as a "world of its own,"…. beyond seriousness" in a unique region of "dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter." Even as poetry has found its way from its ancient use in religious celebrations and texts to a wide variety of the serious and the mirthful, it still has retained its freedom and imagination.

From poetry, in addition to the rhymes and rhyme schemes, and various forms of verse structure, we have gained imagery, metaphor, simile and personification. All of these qualities have opened our own imaginations and our emotional, inner responses. Although poetry played a special role in ancient religious celebrations, and another one in historical Christianity, in both cases, these poetic words rapidly became solidified, cast in stone as the only words to use, the only inspiration to follow. Religious ceremonies became carefully preserved rituals, passed down from one generation of priests and believers to the next.

Unquestionably, the believer, who entered the glorious European cathedrals, watched the gorgeously robed priest lead the same words of the mass, even when it was in Latin and incomprehensible, could be inspired and moved emotionally. He or she may have truly believed the spiritual elements of their souls were moved, their faith enforced and revived. The Protestants, who rejected the non-literate messages of the stained glass windows, the incense, the choirs, and the voices of the priests, believed that simplicity and the spoken word would more clearly lead them to the true God. However, even they kept the metaphoric images of a multi-headed God: a Father, a Son, and a Holy Spirit, (all male) derived straight from the images of poetry.

What of us, today, sitting here in the Meeting House? Perhaps this is a good time to consider carefully the primary tension in adult forms of play. All play contains tension – tension in the player to be certain she is following the rules, tension over the chance of being the winner. There is, however, in all forms of play in which ritual and repetition have become the accepted norm, an even greater tension. You all know the phrase: "But we have ALWAYS done it this way." Do we follow the pattern of primitive man? Or the form we used 200 years ago? Or the form I remember from the 1940's? If we play with changing or removing the rules and rituals of the past, what do we lose? What do we gain?

No group has been as radical in making changes in past religious forms as Unitarians and Universalists. We have been willing to play, over and over, with past beliefs and worship elements, questioning, radicalizing the accepted forms to make them intellectually credible. For over two hundred years, American Unitarians and Universalists have demanded consistency in what we say we believe and in what we do in our worship. In 1840, Sam Longfellow and Sam Johnson, Unitarian students at Harvard Divinity School, decided that the hymns congregations were singing in churches, now professing Unitarian thought, were no longer valid. So they wrote a new hymnal, with different poetry for the words, and classic hymn tunes for the melodies. Some of them remain in our hymnal today.

We UU's have played with our service of worship in many ways, though a scholar, looking back, will find vestiges of our past allegiances. Do we, like the worshipper in a European cathedral, still find that

our worship service inspires us and restores our faith? Is our service a spiritual experience? Before you heap scorn on those questions, let us consider our present hopes and assumptions.

We have written a Covenant, which we say every week. In it we lift up love, service, and seeking the truth. We do not mention another crucial agreement: to accept and tolerate differing religious views, within limits. Some among us are out and out atheists, some are unsure about God's existence, and others believe in some form of the divine. We agree to disagree about these beliefs or disbeliefs in the divine. We therefore reject a dogmatic, "received" view about this key religious element. As to our belief in the spiritual element within us, there is also disagreement.

For those of us who do consider seriously the spiritual life, we find entry to this emotional, less rational aspect of our lives in a variety of ways. For some of us, the connection comes through the music in our service. We are offered organ and piano music, choral pieces, and hymns to stir our emotional, non-verbal response. For others the opening to our inner selves comes through poetry, readings, or the sermon. For those who, like me, were born and raised Unitarian or Universalist, finding the spiritual in life is a continuous asking of questions and perhaps finding new answers, through playing with new ideas or insights. For those of us who have come from another religious tradition, the past clings to us, even as we reject most of our previous religious training. (Are these really the right hymn words?)

The spiritual aspect of religious life is an inner response to a part of ourselves beyond mere words. For some of us, this connection within us is stirred in the company of others at worship. But we can also find it on mountain tops, or among giant sequoias, or in many other natural settings. Some-times another poet can trigger off this spiritual response; the inspiration is not the same among us. Many of us would do well to dwell among images, fantasy, dreams or metaphors. The life of the imagination is often a guide or a companion. However we approach it, be sure that play is there, too.
Blessed Be