

*Some day, after we have mastered the winds,
the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness...
the energies of love. Then, for a second time
in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.*

Teilhard de Chardin

"Stop playing around. This is serious." How many times, while growing up, did well meaning parents and teachers try to drag us out of our childlike wonder and into their world of adult seriousness? Y2K may be one of these times.

Suppose, on the other hand we said: "This is serious, *start playing*." Such a proposal turns everything on its head. Original play is a radical reconfiguration of how we think and act in the world. The transformative power of play does not seek to support or legitimize a cultural worldview, but rather to provide the authenticity of our belonging to the widest possible world.

Such play is a second coming of fire. It is different habit of relationship, a vision and practice wherein our categories are not sacrificed to one another but instead made more complete in a transcendent state of meaning and belonging.

Whether Y2K turns out to be a crisis or an inconvenience, whether it lasts for a few days or weeks, it brings to our immediate awareness a crucial issue: the virtual community underlying our vast computer networks is just that—virtual. Y2K is so frightening because we have never understood that our current model of community functions within a contest superstructure.

Our technological capabilities have collapsed time and space, connecting not only our economic, political, educational, social, legal and governmental institutions, but individuals worldwide. As powerful as these links are, they camouflage the reality that there is little substance beneath these connections. We have been deluded into thinking that technological connectedness is the same as human community, that virtual togetherness equals real belonging.

For many, Y2K exposes the illusion of belonging found in technological connections. The crisis is not merely one of computer programming, it is a failure of belonging and the urgent need to be touched and in touch with real human beings.

Fixing the Millennium Bug, I'm told is technically simple but organizationally overwhelming. The real challenge however, is human and personal. The windows of the human spirit will have been shattered long before the storefronts on the street.

Y2K points out that we have no foundation of belonging upon which to fall back on in such a crisis. What we are left with is what we have always relied on for survival--contest behaviors. But, as John Keegan has pointed out, if we are to survive we must evolve different habits.

Life is at once full of terror and wonder, fear and trust. It is our ability to play in the presence of this mystery that allows us to create and, in turn, be created. This is the play of our origins, when we didn't inquire about meaning, we felt meaning directly. We began life as God's playmate sent into a great wilderness to discover meaning and purpose by connecting and belonging to the mystery of all things.

*He doesn't know the world at all
Who stays in his nest and doesn't go out.
He doesn't know what the birds know best
Nor what I want to sing about,
That the world is full of loveliness.*

Birdsong, 1941

by an anonymous child in the Terezin concentration camp.

King Lear who, on being sent to prison and death with his daughter, turns to Cordelia and says, "They shall sing like birds in a cage and take upon themselves *the mystery of things*, as if they *were God's spies*."

Even approaching death, Lear and this child see with the light of an infant gazing in wonder upon his or her new world. Such a play outlook is a corrective vision of belonging, and it offers us a practical and sustainable strategy of engagement—the necessary new habit John Keegan spoke of if we are to find an alternative to violence and to war.

But, as one cigarette ad puts it: "We'd rather fight than switch." In our contest culture play's gifts of love, safety, true creativity, and belonging are assumed to be limited susceptible to the moral of the Duchess in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: "The more there is of mine the less there is of yours."

Authentic play is our original contract with life. It is the keeper of life's wider, grander plan where kinship and community are determined by the deepest and abiding considerations of life. Play is the bridge over the wide and deepening gap between what we are and what we are challenged to be.

My work with cancer patients, special needs children and gang members demonstrate that play is not just about courage in the face of death, it is about courage in the face of life. Such play accomplishes two tasks.

First, original play awakens our consciousness to a new vision of belonging. Second original play is a tangible, practical and accessible practice. Together, play's vision and practice of belonging teach strategic skills and enable the development of new habits that are important in any crisis:

1. The courage to practice unconditional kindness, a kindness which demands a mental and physical toughness beyond our notions of strong and weak.
2. To engage that part of life in each of us that looks, feels and touches more deeply than the categories within which most of us live our lives.
3. Experiencing a sense of compassion that expresses no sides, no enemies, no blame, no fault, no revenge, no self-defense.
4. Cultivating a stillness within which exists unlimited possibilities for action.
5. Developing and expanding our capacity to love, thereby replacing love's play for self-centered fear as our response to every challenge.

I'm not suggesting we take a sentimental journey through attics of old, dusty toys seeking an inner child. I expect more, not a return to a second childhood, but a recovery of the lost traits of childhood: play, spontaneity, trust, wonder, joy, belonging, simplicity; not as abstract ideas, but as tangible expressions of our innate humanity which lies just beneath the surface of our adult seriousness.

How do we actualize a play paradigm while living in a contest culture? To be effective, play must be lived both individually and as a group process. It takes courage. We begin by engaging wondering and belonging as an individual by disengaging from contest behaviors, gently, without attack, blame or revenge. Next we expand this to include our participation in groups, family, school, work, church, and recreation. In order to sustain the emerging play model we must also substitute play for contest in our educational systems, beginning with the youngest ages and progressively moving up through the grades. Playing by heart is responding to life and life-changing challenges with wonder and affection. Playing by heart is playing with the fire of love.

END

O. Fred Donaldson Ph.D. is a play specialist, author, aikidoist and educational consultant internationally recognized for his ongoing play and research with children and wild animals. For over twenty-five years Fred has been a pioneer in the use of play as an alternative to contest behavior, abuse and aggression. He travels internationally to play with children and animals, conduct workshops, and train adults in the significance of play as a universal and practical way to experience belonging. He has written the Pulitzer nominated book, *Playing By Heart* and has authored over 30 articles.

Touch the Future
Playing With Fire
By O. Fred Donaldson, Ph.D.