

The Death of Religion and the Rebirth of Spirit
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THE DEATH OF PLAY AND THE BIRTH OF RELIGION

In 1975, while working on my third book, *Magical Child*, a school teacher asked how he was supposed to teach children anything and prepare them to face the hard reality of life when all they wanted to do was play. I was working on the book's chapter on play and looked for some authority I could quote to defend or justify what so many saw as a waste of time. I knew this teacher's "hard reality" was a fiction made real by eliminating play. I realized that all I had wanted to do as a child was play or be told stories, and all my own children had wanted was to play or be told stories.

Play is the very reason for life, the reason why nature built such a lifelong compulsion into us to play every chance we get. Play is life living itself, nature celebrating herself, with no explanation or need for justification. We are born to play. The church comes along with some annual mea-culpa day of solemnity, sack-cloth and ashes, and we turn it into a carnival; the night before All Souls' Day becomes the celebration of Halloween, with its pranks and mischief; Christmas becomes Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and jingle-bells; Easter becomes bunnies and new bonnets.

From the moment of conception, life expands through bonds of belonging, pleasure, and joy. Relating with each other and the earth is play. The more complex the organism, the higher its intelligence and the more complex its play of relationships, with the highest of all being the ever-unfolding expressions of love. Play expresses life's love of itself, the highest moral imperative.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNING

Early on, the infant plays with the nipple, plays peek-a-boo with that benign face up there—indeed, with great delight it plays at everything, knowing of nothing but play (until we set about to adjust it to reality and teach it to take life seriously). In play, every action is a learning, our brain free to imprint without censure or pressure. Under any such pressure, energy shifts back to the hindbrain, making forebrain actions such as learning difficult.

Mothers and infants bond in play—we need only listen to a mother's silly, high-pitched baby talk (produced by mothers worldwide, according to Alfred Tomatis's studies) and the infant's squeals of reflected pleasure. Primary mother-infant bonding assures affectionate-sexual love in the adolescent and adult. Loving, playful relationship that extends to society, the living earth, and creation itself is our natural state.

Playful relationship also establishes the context for all learning and development, and because learning and developing are the underlying survival instincts built into us, play is a survival instinct as well. This is what the infant, child, and adolescent wants to do and takes such joy in—if allowed. Through the ongoing mirroring of relationship within ever-widening matrices, children discover and define who they are and what their place in the world and, ultimately, the universe might be. Through the nature and quality of the mirrored relationship between individual and parent and then between individual and society is determined what is learned, which capacities are developed, and even what is remembered.

Joy and pleasure are the bricks and mortar of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual development, and the developing brain must experience joy and pleasure if the complex integration of sensations is to take place. In those first three years or so an infant-child denied joy and pleasure, touching, caressing, and movement, develops a brain that is “neurodissociative,” as James Prescott explains, one that fragments rather than integrates experience. The same critically holds true at puberty and adolescence. Eliminate the safe space of pleasure and joy, acceptance and nurturing, and this expansive, integrated exploration of the world is curtailed and impeded. As a result, the adolescent regresses or dissociates into self-defensiveness, with its implicit violence that will finally surface as domination of others or be internalized as neurosis, illness, or suicide. The emotionally malnourished child may also experience an intensified sexuality at adolescence to compensate for an impoverished sensory-emotional system, but this sexuality is devoid of affection or love, is often violent and destructive, and is hardly conducive to family and nurturing of offspring, should any ever come to be.

THE ORIGINS OF RELIGION

A fundamentalist Christian, a seemingly bright woman with a Ph.D., explained to me at length that it was our duty as adults to break the will of infant-children, teaching them to obey in order that they, having then no will of their own, could be open to God’s will and be obedient to him. If we fail to do this, she said seriously, and leave the child willful, both the child’s soul and the adults’ souls are imperiled and we face the risk of hell. So much for a loving God! Books urging corporal punishment from at least the fifteenth month on have been and still are bestsellers. “Spare the rod and spoil the child” has a long lineage, but we might change the phrase to “Spare the rod and spoil the corporate world that relies on such ‘broken’ children for laborers and our Pentagon that needs them as their fodder for wars.” Without that rod, an actual individual might appear—a danger to culture itself.

A university professor I knew, a preacher in his early years, wrote

a brilliantly researched book on what he considered a major error of history: monotheism. My friend's history showed that as long as any social group or individual could freely discover God within themselves and their world and work out whatever relationship seemed to flow, peace reigned. But when the notion of one God came along—a jealous, violent male God to boot—it wrecked everything, resulting in “Your God and mine can't both be the true one, so one of us has to go!” Thus the battle begins.