

PLAYGROUND FOR THE SOUL
April Fools Day Service – Sunday, April 1, 2007
Paint Branch UU Church – Barbara W. ten Hove, *co-minister*

(Light children's chalice before service starts)

WELCOME WORDS

If you are a regular attendee at our service here at Paint Branch, you may be looking at the Order of Service with bewilderment. Yes, it's different. Why? Because today is April Fools Day. Only once every decade or so do we get to worship on this strange and wonderful day. It seems appropriate on such a day that we turn the service upside down. Fools are well known looking at the world in creative ways. In almost every culture the fool or the trickster points in a new direction and forces us to see things anew. Today's service invites us to play—with time and order, with ideas and music, with children and adults. You are invited into this playground for the soul. We encourage you to enter into the spirit of the morning with laughter on your lips and joy in your heart.

POSTLUDE

CLOSING RESPONSE #123 *Spirit of Life*

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

Closing Words

As we move through this day, let us give thanks for the Fools who teach us to see the world in new and different ways.

Let us remember to laugh and to play even as we do the serious work of building community and deepening our faith.

And may the Spirit of Life, which is a foolish and playful spirit, be with us now and forever more. Amen.

OFFERING/OFFERTORY

SILENCE/REFLECTION/PRAYER

SHARING OF JOYS AND SORROWS

HYMN #1024 *When the Spirit Says Do* (Children leave for RE classes)

SERMON: *Playground for the Soul* Barbara ten Hove

I grew up in playgrounds. No really, I did. When my family moved to the parsonage of the Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church in Alexandria, VA, we moved onto church property, sometimes called the "Holy Hill." On this property there were three—count 'em, three—playgrounds, all used by the preschool that also made its home on that hill. Since we lived on site, I could play in each and every one of those playgrounds pretty much whenever I wanted, as long as I had a sister, a parent or a friend in tow.

Each playground had its advantages. The one designed for the littlest kids had a great playhouse small enough that it kept grownups out, but big enough for a handful of kids to play house. The playground at

the bottom of the hill had the best swing set. It had swings that parents today won't let children play on any more because they are too dangerous. But boy could we fly! And the biggest playground, for the kindergartners at the top of the heap, had fabulous monkey bars that we would crawl over rather like, well, monkeys.

In those days I was a fearless and imaginative child and the playgrounds were the places I lived out my stories. I could be Batgirl one day and a princess the next. I could be a bird or an orangutan. I could play with other children, creating games of all kinds, or climb a tree and have solitary moments of quiet. It was a time of great freedom for me, and it shaped me into the person I am today.

Perhaps you remember the playgrounds of your childhood. Maybe yours was a park in your neighborhood, a swing set at school, or a backyard tree house. Perhaps your playground was the rec room in your family home, the neighbor's sandbox, or even a city street. Children, even in the most dire of circumstances, usually manage to find a way to play. It's what children do. But we grownups often seem to grow out of playing. As a poster at my health club states, "You don't quit playing because you get old; you get old because you quit playing."

I quit playing. I'm not sure exactly when it happened but gradually over time I became someone serious. Maybe it's inevitable in my line of work. Religion is serious business and I became someone who thinks deep thoughts, speaks only of meaningful things, and tries to save the world.

How boring is that!

All right, I do recognize that the world we live in deserves serious people doing serious work. I understand that religion is a guiding force in our lives and that it shouldn't be frivolous. But where is it written that we can't have fun and be meaningful? I mean, aren't joy and laughter good for us? Serious scientists believe that happiness is healthy.

One such scientist is psychologist Martin Seligman [director of the Univ. of Penn. Positive Psychology Center]. He was interviewed by *Time* magazine a couple of years ago, which reported that he "finds three components of happiness: pleasure ('the smiley-face piece'), engagement (the depth of involvement with one's family, work, romance and hobbies), and meaning (using personal strengths to serve some larger end).

Of those three roads to a happy, satisfied life, pleasure is the least consequential, he insists: "This is newsworthy because so many Americans build their lives around pursuing pleasure. It turns out that engagement and meaning are much more important"" [Wallis, Claudia. "The New Science of Happiness." *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005].

So happiness is serious business, worthy of religion. Religion is all about meaning; it is one important way we engage in the world. And if religion can bring us happiness, why shouldn't happiness be a part of our religion? Can our faith teach us to play as well as to work?

Unitarians and Universalists come from a long line of Puritan stock. Our forebears were extremely serious people who saw religion as a duty. Worship services were long and unrelentingly instructive. Music was not even used to break up the monotony! While modern UUs are more willing to allow music

into worship, we still tend toward the serious in our religious lives and practices. Can we learn to lighten up? Can we let the foolish play a role in our faith?

Since I am not very foolish, I turn to some of my colleagues who are. One such colleague is Robert Fulghum, author and UU minister. Fulghum is a fool. And I mean that in an absolutely good way. He was the half time minister for 18 years of the UU Church in Edmonds, WA. [My co-minister and spouse] Jaco had the good fortune to follow Robert into that job and has gotten to know him over the years. He confirms this description.

When Fulghum shows up, you never know what's going to happen. He lives very much in the moment, experiencing the beauty and the absurdity of life fully. He's a great storyteller and his famous, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (today's reading) is a powerful testament to his religious nature. He gets it that kids have so much to teach us about life and play. Truthfully, he's just a big kid himself. That's why he's so much fun to be around.

But his big kid is not a bully or a brat. His inner child is what you would call a "wise fool." Fools such as this look at the world and see it for what it really is—a mixed up, crazy place where people do amazingly wonderful and terribly horrible things, sometimes all at the same time. Fools tell the truth, even if the truth can be a little hard to take. Fools also encourage people to play even when crying might seem like a better response to the situation.

Take a wedding, for instance. Weddings are powerfully serious. Trust me, I know. One time I made the mistake of telling the Mother of the Bride that her daughter might lighten up a little and worry less about what was going on at her wedding. The poor bride took this so seriously she actually wrote me a letter apologizing for being so serious. Whoa.

Fulghum tells a great story of presiding at one big wedding, where lots of money had been spent and perfection was expected. Only the organist didn't show up. The organist didn't show up—oh, the horror! The bride and her mama were on the verge of collapse. Fulghum, the fool, to the rescue. Telling the bride to get into processional position, he invited the congregation—every person there—to *be* the organ. Yes, together they hummed, as he conducted: *Dum, dum de dum. Dum, dum de dum. Dum dum de dum dum de dum dum de dum.*

I admire and even envy this playful spirit. I think our world desperately needs laughter and joy and play. Yet, we struggle against our playful tendencies. Or we turn play and joy on end and act as if sarcasm and cynicism are the only ways to laugh. Let us be sardonic or else!

This sardonic cynicism is terribly in vogue right now. I understand why this is. We are a world at war, and people all over the globe keep finding ways to kill each other. Cynicism seems like an appropriate response. But if we are called to create a better world, shouldn't we imagine one first?

Can we imagine a world where instead of "killing fields" we create playgrounds? I remember that wonderful poster from the anti-nuclear movement that said, "It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber." The poster showed a little girl in her school playground happy and safe. It was a playful response to a serious concern. And as with many who saw that poster, it struck a chord deep within me.

One organization that takes their foolishness quite seriously is a group in San Francisco called “Faithful Fools.” Started by our friend and UU minister Kay Jorgenson, the Faithful Fools have a street ministry in downtown San Francisco, serving the needs of the poor and homeless. Jaco and I support this group because it brings real joy and hope to a world so lacking in both. In a recent letter we received from them, they described their community, which they call the “Fool’s Court” in this way:

The Fools Court is a home, a place to enter and be welcomed; a place to struggle with our demons; a place to tap into the strength and creativity of our own spirits; a place to eat a meal and have conversation; a place to strengthen one’s faith; a place to joke around and dance together; a place to argue and get frustrated and stomp out the door; a place to return to; a place to discover who we are and how we are and trust that love will keep us [from the Faithful Fools fundraising letter of February 2007].

Doesn’t that description describe who we are as a faith community? Don’t we try to create a religious home here where we can care for one another, dance and joke and laugh together, get angry and get over it, and offer our gifts of creativity and spirit to one another? Every now and then when I’m here at church on a Sunday morning, I step outside myself and look around. In one room I see a gaggle of children with a couple of adults, telling stories that teach about kindness and caring. In another I see teenagers planning for a conference as they lounge about in a room made safe and sacred. Outside I see kids looking for minnows in the stream, their teacher laughing with them as they all try to stay dry. In this room I watch as together we hear music that makes us weep and words that make us think and moments of quiet joy. And yes, sometimes even laughter.

What we do here may not look like a playground or even a Fool’s Court. But if we need metaphors to help us understand the power of community and spiritual growth, the playground is not a bad one to use. Playgrounds are places where we can feel safe to try new things. Playgrounds are places where we can play alone or with friends. Playgrounds are places where we can learn the rules—and decide when to break them. Playgrounds are places where we can have fun and act silly. Playgrounds are places where we can make friends and pick each other up when we skin our knees.

And yes, playgrounds are also places where bullies can misbehave and people can get hurt. When I was five I knocked out a bunch of my teeth in a playground. Others can tell stories of kids behaving badly toward each other in their favorite playground. Churches can be places where this kind of thing happens, too. We are human, after all.

But what our faith can offer us as we play together in this playground is a set of guidelines that are a bit like the rules often placed on the playground fence. Rules that Robert Fulghum says we learned in kindergarten. The top of his list reads this way:

Share everything.
Play fair.
Don't hit people.
Put things back where you found them.
Clean up your own mess.
Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

These are good guidelines, ones that we should all be willing to follow. The playground or the church—both are good places to learn and grow and care and yes, play.

As I get older, I hope to become more of a fool and less of an old fogey. It won't be easy. After all, I am a serious person in a serious business. So I ask you to help me. And I'll try to help you. When we are frowning too much or risking too little; when we are unwilling to share or too burdened to care; or when we are all just acting too darn serious for no good reason other than it makes us feel important—let's call each other back to the playground.

Let's get on the seesaw and talk back and forth and upside down until we start to laugh. Let's then run to the swing set and remember what it feels like to fly. Then on to the monkey bars for a good dose of just hanging on. And, when we have played and laughed enough, let us sit down together and share our peanut butter sandwiches and cookies with everyone we meet.

Thanks for playing with me today. Let's do it again soon.

HYMN #1003

Where Do We Come From

READING: *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

R. Fulghum

INTONATION

FLAMING CHALICE DEDICATION

Michael Leger, *worship associate*

HYMN #1007

There's a River Flowin' in My Soul

CALL TO WORSHIP

As we gather on the sacred ground of this church, I call us into worship.

Worship means to shape things of worth.

What shall we shape together today?

Time?

Community?

Energy?

Commitment?

What will we shape today?

What worthy things call us to be together?

Laughter.

Tears.

Memory.

Hope.

May our time together bring us joy.

May we shape that joy into creativity.

May we mold that creativity into play.

May we sculpt that play into community.

And may that community sustain and hold us

As we worship together today.

PRELUDE