

Considering “Play”
By
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Introduction

When I performed as Joe Stoddard, the Undertaker, in the student production of “Our Town” this winter, I was asked what it was like to act in a play. I frequently attend Adelphi athletic events and watch our teams play. When I visit my grandchildren, we play. What is “play”?

The word “play” has many roles, but the one I emphasize today is the third example, child’s play. Play is joyful, a release of tension or a burst of fun. It is a rehearsal for the rest of life: setting rules, negotiating disputes, choosing sides. It provides for building friendships, fosters imagination, allows for fantasy, requires communication, can expose one to diversity in all its forms, and can enhance empathy. Play is essential for developing resilience, courage, cooperation, independence, and inquisitiveness; healthy bodies, active minds, and generous spirits; and mental, physical, and emotional capabilities.

I recall pick-up games; the yo-yo; shooting marbles; story hour at the library; scraping a spoon across sandpaper held behind my back to simulate a mouse; having more fun with the box a toy came in than with the toy itself; building a log cabin - - partially, that is - - with Uncle Harold’s prized young pine trees I cut down before he came home; imagining I could fly; hitting tennis balls against the garage; debating big issues, taking both sides, while walking across town; catching fish with a safety pin tied to a string, with a pine cone as a floater, a stone as a weight, and freshly dug worms as bait.

I recall these and other memories of play, as a child, as a parent, and as a grandparent, and tell stories about them. I can do this because of the impressions these memories made on me, enhanced by family photographs and my mother’s poems. I conclude with one she called, “Your Boy.”

Your Boy

Have you a boy about seven years old,
Who frequently does just as he has been told,
But in spite of all effort will shape to the mold
Of a bandit?

Do you also wonder if your boy will ever
Put any speediness in his endeavor,

Although he be most self-reliant and clever,
But stubborn?

Are you on the verge of losing your mind,
Over his questions of every kind,
From “Where is heaven?” to “What is a mind?”
And “Why is it?”

Is he now an Indian off on the run,
Then maybe a cowboy with a holster and gun,
At practically any time ready for fun,
Or a movie?

Does he make pets of plain earth worms and ants;
Continually does he prattle and prance;
Outgrow all his shirts and his socks and his pants,
Or need patches?

After you’ve punished him, could you just weep,
When he says “Sorry, Mom”, before going to sleep,
And signals a message you always will keep,
That he loves you?¹

Word pictures and family photographs help rekindle the mental images of a child’s play. I rejoice in them all; they helped shape who I am.

¹ Ann Waterman Scott, “Your Boy”, New England Homestead, November 8, 1947.