



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Spiritual Life of Golf,”
a sermon given by Cil Dullea
on July 7, 2013

First years are all about integrating our perceptions into prowess; turning over, sitting up, standing, walking, beginning to use language, compelled by its power so soon; within a scant twelve months the astonishing spiral of human development amazes.

Though our conquest of mobility may seem able to occur without social interaction; language development and social competency depend on inter-actions with others. Watch peer play between two year olds. You’ll be reminded that navigating through childhood takes cognitive effort, and though not always fun, most kids wade in, over and over again, mesmerized by attraction.

But consider the first three rules of toddlers: If I want it, it’s mine. If it’s in my hand, it’s mine. If I can take it away from you, it’s mine; nothing spiritual here. Yet through the “language of play” and the “play of language” we do develop conceptually into abstract thinkers, and yes, spiritual beings.

I believe in play. I wouldn’t relinquish what I gained through unstructured afternoons during my early years as a city girl, and later, in the woods and on the pond behind our house in suburbia.

Studies based on the work of Lev Vygotsky have found that students in play-based schools acquire more attributes of “executive function;” those that regulate, control, and manage cognitive processes like; working memory, attention, problem solving, verbal reasoning, mental flexibility, and planning. (I missed out on that last one.) Proponents of these schools argue, “Although play is often thought frivolous, it may be essential.”

But what is “play?” My dictionary offers 72 definitions. Let’s use the 27th – to engage in a game or pastime. Consider, if you will, the evolution of the relationship between play and uses of the word game. For millennia “game” meant the wild beasts one pursued, attacked, and ate, and “fair game” still means anything one or all of us agree it’s okay to attack or abuse. There are 21 other definitions of the word.

Today we often play our games by proxy, watching a screen. Our cultural meaning of “game” is - a competitive activity involving skill, chance, or endurance on the part of the persons who play, according to a set of rules, usually for their amusement, or that of spectators. I suggest the word “amusement” might not be exactly appropriate, especially where

the player feels compelled to play football with a broken leg or hockey with a punctured lung. Here's another usage of "game" – a business or profession, as, "He's in the real-estate game." Perhaps "amusement" inappropriately encompasses the experience of fans at football, hockey, or other pro events because these two definitions have become entwined. Professional sports are big business. Winning and losing evoke intense emotional responses that make a lot of money for owners and those who play for them, but this is outside the province of what I'm speaking about acquiring by playing golf.

Golf is a game with a deceptively simple premise. Get the ball from the tee to the green and into the "cup" in the fewest number of strokes. Repeat for each of the holes you play. That's the game. Come on along for a virtual golf experience and see how the game can transform you while you're having fun.

A player can carry up to 14 clubs, and a little white ball. Actually, bring more than one of those. Begin with the club designed to propel the ball the farthest, called the driver. Place the ball on a tee, a small stick that elevates it so you have a chance to hit it. Stand alongside, (spoken of as "addressing the ball") and think about all you know of the variables involved, the placement of your feet, your grip on the club, alignment of the club face, the distribution of your weight. Review mentally the arc you intend the club to take, and the articulation your shoulders, arms, hips, legs and feet need to assume in order to ensure the balance required to fly that orb straight towards "the cup." Relax, quiet your mind, become the ball. It is an extension of you. Your strength and grace fly it. Swing.

If you hit the ball, try to watch where it goes, but don't peek until your swing's followthrough is complete, or you'll ruin it, and the trajectory the ball travels.

Play with others. Golf buddies watch the ball for you. Over time you four will become close. It may be that you see them infrequently off the course, but you'll all know each other well, for you'll observe each other, "in the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" as we, with a few years behind us, heard Boone Arledge intone so often.

In a well-executed drive you might not even feel the club head hitting the ball. You will, however, hear it, and you'll find deep satisfaction in the metallic ping that sounds when a ball is well hit, for the ball epitomizes hope in possibility and your faith in your ability to skillfully fulfill it. You soar with the ball, and it's heady.

At other times, the sound the driver's impact makes is ugly. You may struggle to avoid polluting the game with your reaction and commentary. Golf mirrors reality; it validates our strengths and encourages us to accept our limitations. The joy of the game will be sullied more by crippled emotional maturity than by lack of skill. The shot is yours, as is the responsibility for it, but the outcome is always open. I admit freely, though, that dealing with the effort required to make golf a meditation pretty much escaped me when I was young.

Yes, there's no reason to expect you can't improve with each swing, but maturity is coming to terms with the difference between possibility and probability. It's about reconciling

desire with actuality, for though you play with others, the contest is between yourself and that ball. You're in charge. The club is in your hands. That's the honesty that threads the holes you play into a strand of prayer beads. There's no bad pass; no failed block to blame. Your performance is yours to relish or to rage over. Indeed, the snapshot of character the game images is a dose of reality therapy, delivered under the gentlest of guises.

After all, you're outside in the fresh air walking over lush terrain. Birds sing. Chipmunks rush headlong through their lives. Geese fly in, stunningly animated, and once, in the small pond meant to test patience on the fourth hole, a baby otter floated on his back munching new shoots of cat-and-nine tails spread across his belly. Golf courses are idyllic arenas that foster patience, and anguish. Preparation, engagement, hope, and connection are the repetitive tools of golf's spirituality.

Walk along down the fairway and find your ball. It will take countless holes before you know the right club and how to hit it relative to the spot your ball rests: on the fairway, in the longer grass of the rough, nestled in the leaves of the woods, or the sand of a trap. (This is the ball's lie.) If the ball is in the water, you've sacrificed it, charge yourself a penalty stroke, get over it, and drop another.

Even if the ball is on the fairway there's a vast difference possible in the lie - down in a depression/ difficult, sitting brightly up on top of a tuft of sod/optimistically enticing. Chance rules the game. Golf is for the person who accepts its caprice.

Now guess how far away the green is; different clubs have their separate expectations of range. A four iron goes a lot further than a nine iron, theoretically; and any club hit poorly may dribble along only a few yards. Choose one, set up, focus, and swing. Take your best shot. Accept the consequences. Don't fret about feeling vulnerable! Your foursome will support you. After all, they're playing, too, and it's their turn next! Repeat the hitting, finding, choosing, and swinging until everyone's on the green. Incidentally, if you can hit only half the clubs in your bag really well, you'll be a pretty good golfer.

Up until now, the game has been about divergence. There's room for you to do it your way successfully. On the green, play is convergent. Get the ball in the cup. There's no other way. Grab your putter; ground yourself in silence. Examine the green's undulations. Feel the weight of the putter's head. Mentally, strike the ball and watch it roll across the green and into the cup. Hit it for real. Clunk.

Congratulations, you've been indoctrinated into the cadre of the courteous souls who play golf. Cultivate your own kind words, in time you'll understand the value of each one. There's room for humor, of course, nothing wrong with remarking after a poor shot, "Bad news, it's still your turn." They'll do the same for you.

Initially, keeping score records progress. Hitting the ball many times each hole leaves no working memory of specific performance, making it hard to analyze your game. As you knock a few strokes off your score the perception of improvement occurs. Even for beginners, periodically, a wondrous hit happens. We who love the game admit this is what keeps us

coming back. Funny thing is that while you're watching your score you're also becoming a bit more patient, gentler, and forgiving, both of yourself and others.

Older golfers sometimes don't keep score, though they try their best each time they swing. This hunger for meaningful participation is more than the competitive appetite for a lower score. It's about personal excellence. Besides, the genius of golf is par. A standard to compare your score to that has nothing to do with besting the people you play with. Golf buddies mean much more than someone to beat.

The blessing of the foursome is that through caring social interaction each member of the group joins in the joy of the game, regardless of how well anyone plays, on any specific day, over the life-span of their game. That's a rather profound and true statement. In the case of my foursome, our game has become a meditation on friendship. When we started together, only my dad of our parents had died. Our children were still young and three of us enjoyed good health. I, alone, had grandkids. By now we've all suffered loss of family, reveled in the glimmer of the future glimpsed in tiny new hands, and each of us has faced the specter of our mortality. I know for certain that laughing over ridiculously badly played shots and whooping gleefully when one of us sinks a sixty foot putt has dissipated real pain. We carry gratitude and contentment in our golf bags along with our extra balls and a few band-aids.

Our skills have improved although it's now clear we'll never shoot par. We realize there's always the chance of a hole in one; and that being able to play next year is far from guaranteed.

Recently, I've begun to play with a second group; the pleasure of it is like learning how to make Hollandaise sauce from scratch - delicious. We play on a shorter course. We're more casual as to how often we play, and the composition of the group changes according to individual availability. Two weeks ago Peg brought a friend. She happens to be 82 years old. Yes, her swing is a little compromised But that is irrelevant. She has a game, the epitome of endurance, and a role model!

For the hope of each shot is bonded to our larger hope of living with all the grace we can muster, gratefully and intentionally, within the space and time we're given.