

Write to the Heart of Motherhood  
*connecting to our true voice in the middle of our messy lives*

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## Week 4. THEME AND GUIDANCE



### PLAYING AND WORKING

*Hello, dear one.*

Welcome, welcome to week 4 of our time together in this course. Our theme this week is PLAYING AND WORKING. I'm so excited - I love this topic very much. And – I need it, haha!

I laugh because it's Monday morning and I've got all my conditioned cues lighting up around me and within me that I should feel anxious and stressed because... it's time to get to work! It's... MONDAY!!! My family had a fun weekend full of outdoor play, plus plenty of down time and cuddles together. The weekend was sublime, and I can feel the after-effect of tingly gratitude and happiness in my heart.

So why now on Monday morning, with my husband at work, and my kids at school and with a babysitter, do I feel my mind racing and my body tense? Why not just keep *playing*, as I enter the week? I'll tell you why: decades of personal and social conditioning that this is the moment when we GET BACK TO WORK (stern face, drill sergeant voice). I grew up Catholic, attended a highly competitive school from 7th-12th grade whose slogan was "Academics, Academics, Academics" (... eek!), and trained intensively in ballet 5 days a week through my adolescence

and teens, so I really learned how to work myself hard. But now, in this chapter of my life, I love my work! I've spent a long time unlearning outdated, unhealthy perceptions of what work can look and feel like in order to create a career and purpose I am deeply in love with, that reliably brings me alive. So, WTF! - why these Monday blues, STILL?! I have proved to myself a trillion times that when I give myself to the work I love (including parenting), I come out the other side refreshed, inspired, and feeling well-used. So why do I still forget; why this heaviness and anxiety?

*Can you relate?*

Do you feel the pressure of conditioning around work and productivity, both inside your own body-mind, as well as in the air we breathe as a social organism? I'm aware I am speaking to a diverse audience, in which this might ring with more or less resonance depending on the culture you live in as well as your unique history, typology and personality – but, whether your answer to my question above was “Hell ya! I feel that – UGH, I don't want to go to work...” or “I'm good, ready for work!”... either way, I believe it is immensely empowering, both to our subjective experience of being alive, as well as the potency, authenticity, and realization possible in our writing, that we investigate the structures and associations we have around playing and working. The freedom, effervescence, and novelty available through play are infinite, and we can learn to tap them and channel them like powerful dakinis or benevolent magical sorceresses.

Please take a moment to ask yourself:

When was the last time I engaged so fully in an activity that I lost a sense of time, effort, and separate self?

What's a recent experience in which I felt so satisfied inside the activity, it didn't really matter if I produced something or not?

What's the last game I played that mattered so much I became intensely focused and even serious or competitive?

What's a memory I have of just being completely and utterly absurd? What did that feel like in my body? How was I behaving?

When's the last time I feel that I suspended the ordinary rules of my life and explored a "made-up" world?

I ask these questions to ignite a personal and felt-sense inquiry in you around some primary and helpful distinctions about play. I wonder what it feels like for you to even ask these questions. Do you feel curious? Excited? Nostalgic? It's my hunch that even though play is a vast and various territory, both philosophically and experientially, there is something in the realm of play we all remember from childhood and long for more profoundly than we might realize — even if it also scares us.

### *What is Play?*

We touched on some of the major characteristics of play in the questions we just asked ourselves: Play is the temporary suspension of the ordinary and sometimes unconscious rules and structures we have about ourselves, our lives, and reality itself. Some play removes all rules, and some play sets up *new rules* to roam within. Furthermore, some play simply brings fresh awareness and re-energizes our current rules of engagement. Either way, some of the parts of ourselves we normally keep "offstage" or in "shadow" in the roles of our lives get some stage time out in the light of day because — "it's ok, I'm just playing!" Sometimes we never want these parts of self exposed, *except in play*, but other times play is exactly the means to practice new roles, experiences, and capacities that are not yet within the boundary of our known or presented self (as we so often see in the play of our kids). Through play, we get to audition and perhaps hire and then rehearse new ways of being and expressing ourselves.

So sometimes, in life or art, we play or pretend to express what's outside our identity, until we can include it within our identity. Play creates imaginary, invisible worlds that can be actually entered and inhabited, and thereby transform identity. Play includes risk to experience more, become more, and feel beyond our known reality, *from the inside out*, within these new, imagined, created worlds. In pretending or playing, we get to taste and feel these experiences to see if we trust them and want them enough to take up residence in the visible, conscious self. Sometimes this process goes smoothly with the help of a skillful therapeutic, creative, or relationship container, or because of spontaneous grace, but sometimes it's more messy with the integration happening in fits and starts, and some tug of war over how much power this new aspect of self can wield as it settles into its new home within the boundary of the conscious self. Our writing practice, and any creative act, facilitates this expansion of the known self, as Hans-Georg Gadamer, 20th century German philosopher, touches on when he says:

“The play of art is not some substitute dream world in which we can forget ourselves. On the contrary, the play of art is a mirror that through the centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about.”

An impoverished view of play would have us believe that it is always light, frivolous, and/or happy. A more rich view of play, though, is that it is more about wholehearted participation with our aliveness as it carries us into the unknown, and about becoming absorbed in a mystery and intelligence beyond our separate self, than it is about always being light or happy. Some play is joyous and deeply pleasurable, and some is quite serious and makes us willing to endure pain and challenge - we can see this in our kids sometimes, and certainly in the play of some sports and arts — probably even our own writing at times. My older son often seems most intense, with furrowed brow and gruff voice, when he is, in fact, most absorbed in play. This is because, for the time we have suspended our ordinary, conventional rules of life, or created new ones, if the play is going well, *we forget it's "just play" and become one with the new world we're in.*

Case in point: one time when my nephew, Braeden, was about 2 years old, he created a game with my husband where they hid behind a couch because “dinosaurs were coming.” After a few rounds of having fun getting scared of the “dinosaurs” and hiding, Braeden’s fear shifted from exciting to overwhelming, and he ended up sobbing in my husband’s arms. He’d created the game and then become so absorbed in it that he was terrified. I think we adults have our own ways of doing this too sometimes, if we dare to look closely at our own minds.

### *What (else) is Play?*

Play is *autotelic* behavior, meaning that its purpose and satisfaction is inherent and lies within its present moment unfolding, not a future goal. We all know this feeling on the best of days, when writing is pleasurable and nourishing in and of itself, not necessarily because of any particular achievement. Hungarian-American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is famous for his work about the concept of flow states, in which we are highly focused and lose a sense of time, separate self, and effort. Flow states often occur when the challenge at hand is just slightly beyond our current skill level, requiring wholehearted attention and a leap beyond our conventional filters of perception and mechanisms of engagement. (Our practice of “listening” from 2 weeks can sometimes concentrate us into flow states.) Play often absorbs us into flow, or flow into play, and both states are inherently fulfilling and energizing (autotelic), without much future orientation.

Play is also sometimes “pointless” (from the perspective of productivity and accomplishment), except for that essential point of encountering our own undomesticated aliveness, which is, again, inherently satisfying. “(Wo)man plays only when (s)he is in the full sense of the word a human being, and (s)he is only fully a human being when (s)he plays,” says Friedrich Schiller, 18th century German poet, philosopher, physician, historian, and playwright. The activity of play can be meandering, circuitous, and oscillating, and is born of the ever-present energetics arising *between* polarities and opposites. We can probably all remember beginning our writing with one thing in mind, and then following tangent after spiraling tangent, wandering along until we sense a gold nugget or truth bell leading us into the heart of it — a flow state or experience of

deep connection or union between ourselves as writer, the act of writing, and what's being written down on the page.

This meandering quality, this sniffing out the clues and getting lost as we get found, vibrating in the energetics of exploration, makes play and creative process an ongoing inquiry into the unique beauty and truth available *in the space between* objects, beings, or ideas. One of my favorite choreographers, Ohad Naharin, artistic director of Tel-Aviv-based Batsheva Dance Company, describes how he always gives his dancers not one image or idea, but a set of images or ideas, to play with in their minds as they dance, as it keeps them off kilter and actively exploring as they enact the movement, instead of consolidating around one single, fixed approach. Rainer Maria Rilke, early 20th century Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist, echoes this idea of inhabiting and playing in the space between things when he writes:

"Take your practiced powers  
and stretch them out  
until they span the chasm between two  
contradictions... For the god  
wants to know himself in you."

Another aspect of play is that it can be risky — it can expose us to primordial energies of chaos, eros (aliveness and desire), creation, destruction, rage, hilarity, joy, connection, freedom, conflict, and every emotion possible. I believe this is why many people stop playing as they enter adulthood, and I also believe these primordial energies are exactly what many people long for deeply in their lives. Play can be risky — it can be a joyous reveling that brings out our best, AND its untamed, mercurial energy can also sometimes invite forward experiences and parts of ourselves that may not yet feel safe. In play, we sometimes lose control — for better or for worse. We may suddenly experience previously repressed brilliance and light, and/or previously repressed darkness and destruction. Or anything in between.

Play opens doors to experience more of reality — it can take us into deeply personal realms as well as the spacious awareness beyond the personal. Because of the risky, exciting edges possible in play, it can be helpful to consider and contemplate how, when, and with whom we enter our really deep play, as well as intentions for doing so. For example, I know at this point in my performing career that there has to be a lot of trust built up in relationships with collaborators for me to enter creative process in making performance work, as well as shared agreements for how we will navigate power dynamics. Otherwise, there is too much risk for me or others feelings prematurely overexposed in sharing creative ideas, or for labyrinthian disagreements in making choices about the work. Play can create deep bonds or intractable conflict — or both at the same time, where (with the right partners) profound transformations are possible through creatively engaging the conflict and being willing to be changed by it.

To review, some ways to define play are:

- 1) the temporary suspension of ordinary rules and structures and the creation of new worlds and roles in order to audition, experiment, and potentially hire new parts of self previously in shadow,
- 2) wholehearted participation with aliveness, ranging from intense and serious to jovial and light,
- 3) autotelic, or intrinsically rewarding, activity, which absorbs us into its spirit and ethos,
- 4) an exploratory, oscillating, meandering activity or energy enlivened in the space between polarities, ideas, or beings, and
- 5) a submersion into and embodiment of primordial energies such as creation, destruction, desire, and chaos. Albert Einstein, German-born theoretical physicist, famously said, “Play is the highest form of research.” When we are playing, we are discovering more of *what is*, within and around us, in an embodied, experiential, unfiltered way.

As Einstein points out, we can indeed engage these various aspects of play as “the highest form of research” on our life. There’s a story I love from my friend Trevor Tierney, a legendary lacrosse goalie and assistant coach at Denver University, which frames this idea well. Trevor came over one night after a D.U. game, and described how the team, which is elite level and has

won the National Championship in recent years, was frustrated after a hard loss. In the locker room afterward Trevor was trying to coach the guys and raise their spirits when their fired-up team captain, 20 years old at the time, broke into a compelling speech. He challenged how deep their motivations were — did they just want to win (which is great), or did they want to embody radical excellence? He said (and this is the part that moves me), “When things get most intense, we have to ask ourselves what game we’re playing — what game are we willing to invest everything in?” I used this as a teaching frame in yoga and dance classes for weeks after hearing this story.

Dear, amazing, resilient, tender, tired, gorgeous, perfectly imperfect, boundlessly compassionate and utterly human mama-friend: *when things get intense, what game are you playing? What is the game or games that you are willing to invest everything in?*

Let’s be real. We work so hard. We are, all of us, working hard, for our kids, our families, and the lives we have created and are creating. This is why I’ve spent 8 pages writing about play, not work. We will talk about work in a few moments here, but I consciously chose to heavily outweigh our focus exploring play because in American culture at least, we are trained too much how to work hard, but not how to play well, which just might be a secret key, moment-to-moment, to living lives worth dying for.

Let’s look briefly at common associations with what work should be, and then some deeper possibilities. Most people typically associate work as an activity bound by limiting rules and structures *for the purpose* of getting something made or done. Especially since the Industrial Revolution, there is often a mechanistic or robotic quality of having to shut down or reduce our humanity, our fullness, our physicality, our aliveness and eros, our absurdity, and, perhaps most sadly, our creativity. But if we look at work as disciplined activity, and probe deeper into the root of the word discipline, we find *disciple*: one who gives her full self to a teaching or a teacher. One who is wholeheartedly engaged. Here we see a bridge begin to form between the activity of work, if activated through this lens, and the activity of play. Like our listening practice, like our mothering, like creative practice and like play, work can become a space where we



become one with the activity at hand, and are therefore nourished by it rather than depleted. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Tibetan meditation master and founder of Naropa University, described discipline as “joyful exertion,” and Kahil Gibran, Lebanese-American poet and author of “The Prophet,” defines work as “love made visible”... two more keys with which to open our understanding of work beyond what we probably inherited from our culture.

We have inherited an understanding or presumption that work and play are opposites. And this is surely one valid way to look at and engage the activity of our lives.

But I want to offer us mama-writers a different perspective, and see what tiny and radical magic might be possible through us leveraging this lens:

*I want to offer that Play has no opposite.*

I want to offer that as philosopher and physics professor, Daniel Greenberg, says, “Play is the MOTHER of all disciplined activity; its discipline comes from within the players.”

I want to offer that the spirit of embodied, wholehearted, autotelic, fully alive, fully invested, imaginative, wide-eyed, world-making, rule-breaking, rule-making, rule-changing, rule-following, untamed, primordially connected play, is right here and available — always.

Work is not the opposite of play; discipline is not the opposite of play; grief, even, is not the opposite of play. What am I playing right now? What role, what game? What rules and structures? *When things get most intense, and even when they don't, what game am I choosing to invest in?* What games do I play, knowing that even as I choose them, even as I actively participate, I cannot control them — I have to also surrender.

What game are you playing, even as you hear these words? Is there a goal, a way to win? If so, what is it, and how? *Do you want to play this right now?* If not, do you choose to surrender to it

anyway, for the sake of serving another or a higher purpose, or will you choose to change the game?

I am living these questions alongside all you brave souls.

Our work is a form of play! Play is its Mother. We just get so absorbed in the game that sometimes we forget. And it doesn't have to look any sort of happy, shiny way (but it can!) — it's just matter of turning the dial up on exploration, wholeheartedness, and wonder, within whatever it is we happen to be doing right now. Start here, wholehearted, again.

Because – play is the enactment of the full spectrum of the forces of this universe through this precise living, breathing moment, in all that is seen and unseen, all that is known and unknown — this one mind manifesting as zillions of various things, birthing itself everywhere right now, devouring itself, destroying itself, making love to itself, birthing itself again, mothering itself, witnessing itself, burying itself, making and remaking itself again and again, simply perhaps, to know itself (myself! ourself!) with more complexity, simplicity, and intimacy.

How will we participate? What games will we enact? How will we give voice to this great, majestic, and gorgeously ordinary play of being human?

I'll leave you with this simple poem of mine, an invitation to enjoy a few deep breaths, and a wish for this week that we all experience deep peace, awesome passion, and full play in their interplay.

## DISCIPLINE AND ROAMING FREE

Once mind is remembered  
to be infinite  
the difference between discipline  
and roaming free  
is nothing.

We become empty  
enough to be filled  
with rich freedom-responsibility  
of being and serving  
all of it  
and just this one  
at once.

I feel my feet  
on this hard wood floor  
and breathe you in.

We make and discover  
each other, always only  
in this moment.