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ON PLAY AND MEANING IN SOCIETY

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Play is universal. It is like worship and like learning. Men everywhere have invented games, dances, physical contests. The Aztecs with their ball games, the Yaquis with their wild deer dance the Tarahumara running like deer while playing football over endless miles are expressing the universal impulse that led the Greeks to initiate the Olympics. At its best, play is a social enterprise. For full enjoyment the game needs to become an expression of fellowship, an immersion within the game that gives the players a sense of common rhythm and purpose that welds the body and the spirit.

When institutionalized, such as organized bull fighting, horse racing, baseball, football, soccer, play is more than games. It is in fact popular drama, socialized symbols of heroism, skill, speed, achievement, victory, and defeat. Such game involves popular emotion and sometimes popular hero worship. They are symbolic forms of conflict, expressions of cultural values, and definitions of the ideal of manhood. They become public ways of exhibiting cultural values and national pride. It is a way for an individual, a group, or a people to define its character in public, in the face of the world. A team of athletes known for their skill, endurance, strength, and speed describes not only themselves but the community that nourished them, the culture that applauded and sent them out to meet the world in friendly combat, to prove themselves worthy of those they represent, winning for themselves honors, and for their fellows pride and distinction.

The way of man with nature and with his fellows is tentative, - experimental, playful. Anyone who has watched a group of farmers -

each armed with a scythe mow a field of hay, or a group of men armed with machetes cutting down a field of corn, will have recognized that work — and play go together in the less mechanized society. It is no accident — when the Indians in Bolivia dress in their holiday clothes and sing their folk songs while working the land for the church as their forefathers did in the ancient days of the Inca Empire. The work men do jointly, — voluntarily takes the form of a rhythmic dance, where the body and spirit are in unison and where work and play are the same. The community when tilling the land together, where the women dressed in the gala dresses, prepare food to refresh the body, the song that expresses the emotional satisfaction of physical well being and the rhythmic pace with which the task in hand is being carried forward are akin to play. Throughout the ages, the people working the land have both played and worked, or worked and played in a kind of ungoing rhythm. That is how man mastered the physical world about him. Play is almost the essence of life itself for it identifies man with nature. It is a symbolic expression that he belongs to the earth and is part of it. It symbolizes a gladness of — being alive and part of a known and identifiable environment. People are blessed who have not lost this identity between themselves and the physical setting within which they find their sustenance, their mates, their companionship, and their community. When play, rhythm, song and work go together and where they are all rolled into the daily rhythm of an' ngoing community its members are blessed indeed. Life here is meaningful and its hardships and sorrows become absorbed in a total symbolism. In such a world there is no alienation, no sense of defeat, no lack of will to be part of the group for that is where the meaning, the essence of life is to be had. Rhythm, companionship, work, play, and community identity go together, and the individual stands inside.

the group not outside of it. Self-consciousness and personal ambition are almost meaningless, almost non-existent. That is how the great cathedrals of medieval Europe were built, by the hands of anonymous architects and plastic sculptors. That is how the great monuments of Indian - America were created. It was the work of men absorbed in their love of the supernatural and doing the work in common harmony and rhythm as a symbolic game - or it could never have been done at all.

It is difficult to write about play because it is all embracing and timeless. It begins at the very beginning of human life - or, better perhaps, of animal life. For it seems as if life and play go together. It is earlier than what the anthropologists call "culture" and has vast outlets long before "civilization". All one needs to do is watch a couple of kittens, or puppies tumbling about, nipping and scratching at each other, chasing each other, knocking each other down, and tumbling all over each other as if their playfulness would never come to an end. And any one who has watched groups of children at random amusement will have glimpsed its significance. They invent games, dances, running, matches, hide and seek, wrestling, climbing, standing, on their heads, yelling, shouting, jumping, fooling and, above all, laughing. The whole body is involved, every muscle, every organ. Energy pours out - unstinted and uncontrolled. Every child has fallen fifty times, picked itself up and rejoined the game. This is how they make friends, develop companion ship, grow in strength and self-assurance, become members of groups, gangs, that have an identity, sometimes a name and a leader. And the whole thing is play. It is fun, excitement, companionship, loyalty, identity. It is the beginning of society, of culture, of civilization for here they take their basic values from each other in play. They acquire honor and pride, standards and ambition from each other. They acquire their discipline and their character from the games they

play with their companions and from their companions in the games they play.

Without play there would be no society no personality, no loyalty, no honor and no life with one's kind. These basic values are not taught really in school, or by lectures, or by admonitions. They are passed on from children to children, from youngsters to youngsters. When the boy or girl is ready to go to school or the high school, his character has already been shaped by the spontaneous free flowing group activities of the children in the yard, the street, and town square, the field. Without play, man would grow if he grew at all to be a stiff, unsocial, uncommunicative creature who would have no friends, no security, and incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong. The family - and the school merely reinforce what youngsters learn from each other at play and men continue to play all the time even if half-consciously - when they are at work . Play is the essence of life for the young and the old--boxing, swimming, wrestling, running, football, baseball, - soccer, checkers, darts, chess, horseshoe throwing, any game, all games.

The free flow of associated relationship, the companionship in a difficult contest, the natural discipline that a game like football or soccer imposes upon the group defines their relations to each other and jointly against the opposing team. It provides a special quality of social integrity and nurtures a regard for others which helps define man's place amongst men.

The essence of the difference that lies between a good society and a less desirable one is the degree of spontaneity that the individual, the group, is permitted to retain in its daily life. The demands of - society can be stifling, destructive, humiliating, downgrading, excessive, taking from the individual the spark of i that can

only be had in spontaneity, in the freedom of the body and the spirit to respond as the rules of the game require. And all of life is a game which terminates only in the graveyard.

Societies in some ways can be divided or measured in the degree of spontaneity— I am not speaking primarily of political freedom — I am speaking of the freedom of the spirit which really can only go hand in hand with the freedom of the body, of associated group, of the self-imposed rule, or better still of the rules natural to the game and the game really becomes life itself—all of it—not just the children's game of marbles, or the boys' play of basketball. It really becomes the game of living at ease with your neighbors, of being — comfortable in your work, of playing the part of an active and good citizen.

Play is many things. It is harmony. It is rhythm. It contains its own logic. Every game of children or grownups has an inner logic which sets the rules. It is only a game if the rules are followed and lived by. This is even true of animals at play. Dogs nip at each other though pretending to be furious and look ferocious. Kittens only pretend to scratch while tussling over each other. Play carries its own sense of permissiveness, propriety and rule which may never be broken.

It is a voluntary activity set within rules known to all players, the order is spontaneous, the law part of the game itself. From a certain angle play educates, trains, disciplines, and prepares for life but does so without plan or purpose because it is a part of life—perhaps the major ingredient in making the social order bearable, acceptable, and tolerable and only as long as the element of play is not suppressed; the slave gang and the prison is where play has been driven underground

and denied. But even here a close observer will note that even in a slave gang, even in a prison, the spontaneous urge for play, frolic, uninhibited games and the expression of fun finds its way to the surface. Here is something as strong as life itself, stronger than the bars of a prison or the state of slavery. Play, however, lies beyond moral valuation. It has nothing to do with folly, with truth, wisdom, goodness. It is a category by itself though it permeates all of life and all ages and all cultures it cannot be identified or classified with anything else—it is unique to life—it exists, and as long as life exists, it prevails. It appears and by appearing changes the situation. It makes it lighter, easier, better, it allows for fun, mirth, hilarity, frolic. It can bring buoyancy, joy, delight but it is none of these. It is an activity that manifests itself with the living being and must be considered part of it. It flourishes most easily where there is room for spontaneity, where the life of man is enveloped in a mansided cultural milieu, where play goes hand in hand with art, religion, architecture, music, drama, philosophy and literature. The Greek games, the Olympic, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian were all part of a total culture, where the people were both the spectators and the actors, and where the City State provided for a face to face community. In fact, it can certainly be argued that the humanistic culture of man flourished in the City States of Greece—Athens, Corinth, the City States of Italy Greece, Florence, Venice, and the small German States before the days of Bismarck and Hitler. Be that as it may, the world of spontaneity and freedom for the human spirit, the world of myth, wonder, surprise and belief where man turned faith into a symbolic drama and worship into a game that would appease the gods has almost passed away in those parts of the world that call themselves modern. It has in these parts of the world been substituted

by other views of the nature of the world and of man's relation to it. It has become a world in which there is only room for logic, reason, science, measurement, accuracy, speed, performance, and productivity. This is a situation where man aims to control the world rather than abide in it, where he interferes with nature in pursuit of his short term interests and does not really know what it does to the total ecological environment. There is in fact accumulating evidence that what man is now doing to nature may in the end prove more inexorably fatal than the atomic bomb itself. In this world spontaneity, gaiety, — freedom, laughter are substituted for by diligence, ambition, anxiety, fear and insecurity. The spirit of play is challenged by the society science has created and it remains a question whether many can survive in a world where every moment has to have its logical explanation, — where every step is regulated by the computer, and every utterance recorded by some hidden, "snooping" mechanism in the hand of those who would guide and control and direct everyone's life. The challenge is a real one and the stakes are human sanity for sanity and play are handmaidens and can only live together. The challenge to the spirit that brought the Olympics into being is also a challenge to a society of regimentation and the obsession of endless material possessions.

What characterizes our world is enhanced regulations. The rules that govern the life of man in our industrial society are innumerable and are daily being multiplied. Each rule and regulation so seemingly necessary acts to restrict the area of spontaneity of play. And man is caught in a bind where he seemingly has no choice. He cannot go back and he can only go forward at the known risk that the present direction leads to a kind of self-strangulation. How otherwise explain the revolt of the youth of our time from Warsaw To Prague, to Belgrade, Paris, London, New York, 1

and Los Angeles. They are rebelling because the elements of spontaneity and play have been siphoned out of their lives, and without spontaneity and play life has no meaning, no values, and no direction.

This present state of increasing logic, reason, and specialization has been of slow growth and its effects but little noticed. Our "civilization" has tried to meet the challenge to play in our culture — but not sufficiently and not effectively. It may perhaps be incapable of meeting it.

The last hundred and fifty years have been characterized by increasing industrialism, mechanism, urbanism, centralism, uniformity, identity, efficiency, productivity, and ever larger bureaucracy. This list is incomplete, for there is also increased literacy, communication, travel, a longer life span and many things too numerous to mention. Certainly they seem or seemed at the beginning good and desirable. And so they were. But perhaps there is a limit to the extent of industrialism, mechanism, urbanism, centralism, etc. Perhaps we can see a point when any further growth of these elements in contemporary society will prove harmful or even fatal to human well being and possibly to human survival.

It is clear that the work and play theme that characterized agricultural societies through the ages is not possible in the large mechanized factories, mines and mills. They are governed by rule of speed, cost, efficiency, time, and productivity, completely indifferent to essential needs of human spontaneity and play. So in the large city the larger it becomes, the more crowded, the more noisy, the less habitable — those who can, flee from it permanently or for a few days a week to get back to nature, to the green grass, the birds, the frogs and the grasshoppers, away from the time clock, from efficiency, calculation, and logic. But only a few can escape. This is true of all the large cities of the world and they are increasing in size. Where a hundred years ago only about five

percent of the people of the world lived in urban centers, now in the United States only 10% make their living on the land, and this trend is universal and the growing urban center is of necessity crowded, noisy, often dark, often sunless, regulated, regimented, bureaucratic, anonymous. It provides no room for a face to face society, for the companionship and the comradeship required for social cohesion and identity out of which the game grows and the team is organized. The mass in the city can no longer play or participate in playing. It can only stand in long lines to find admission to a "movie" or a theatre, a boxing match, to watch others play, to cheer and shout at other people throwing a ball or winning a fight. Or they can only sit at home and watch television. These are not adequate substitutes for what our "civilized" world has lost. Play is something we all need to participate in personally, and a life of vicarious participation will not do. It is true, of course, that in more recent years the large cities have begun to attempt to meet the challenge of the regimentation of the machine, the bureaucracy and the factory, or in large government.

Cities have tried to develop parks, playgrounds, stadiums, amphitheatres where the people can go on Sundays or at night - but excepting for the park and the playgrounds these facilities do not allow the individual to play - they make it possible for him to watch other people if he has the money to pay for the ticket. It is also true that most schools have gymnasiums and playgrounds. But again, it is for the few, under some kind of vigilance and is no substitute for the hilarity of a school yard or field where all the village children ran wild and played, or the village green where the entire community turned out to dance in the open under the sky.

There are many cities and universities in the world that have

stadiums that will hold 30 to 50 thousand people — but of course this is the difficulty. The fifty thousand people have to go through the frustration of securing a ticket, standing in line, traveling to the place and to sit for hours watching others play - instead of playing themselves.

The professionalization and the institutionalization of games of sport inevitable in our society merely add to the difficulty because they provide a substitute for personal participation rather than an opportunity. In some measure this has happened to music. In a country like the United States there are now over fifty well-known orchestras - like Philadelphia, New York, Boston, etc., - but there are fewer musicians, fewer people who play themselves. Piano playing has almost gone out of existence except as a professional matter - the city apartment has no room for a piano, and the noise made by a person learning how to play would be unacceptable to the other tenants in the same building - and this is true of other instruments. Only if you can go to school and take music lessons and have time to practice, and the money to pay teachers can you become proficient as a musician - and that means a professional route - rather than just fiddling for pleasure. Certainly this is true for brass instruments. The radio, the portable player, the television will amuse you. You need only sit and listen or watch, why bother - why exercise initiative, why possess spontaneity, why should you play yourself? It may even be against the law one of these days. Only in painting and in sculpture, but especially in painting, has there been a visible growth of personal initiative. The sale of paints, brushes, and paper has become a major commercial enterprise in most modern cities. Taken as a whole our industrial society has regimented and isolated the individual. Regularity, system, clock punching, responding to the whistle, working a given number of hours each day, spending a

given number of hours traveling to and from work, living in an environment with a physical relation to the world which allows for little initiative and little spontaneity. The play element in life is stifled or disturbed. The restlessness in the world is the by-product of the lack of the kind of relaxation and joy that an unregimented society makes possible. Play belongs with poetry, art, philosophy, architecture, the dance, drama and music. It requires a spiritual freedom and a spontaneous outpouring that men who live in a mechanical universe attuned to material productivity cannot really achieve.

The pressure of mechanism, efficiency and regularity is so great that in most industrial societies the hours of labor have been markedly reduced to eight, to seven, and in some cases even to six per day. But this is not the answer. The people freed from the factory, the office or the shop do not know what to do with their leisure. The city has no place for the use of their free time except as spectators and the urban setting has not permitted the growth of the innumerable small "societies", fellowships, that would be required for the spontaneous play-games involving most of the people released from their labor after a shortened work day. And, unfortunately, in most cities the population has now lost the innumerable folk songs, dances, plays, games that once occupied the leisure hours of the mass of people - from hand carving, knitting, to local football and horseshoe throwing.

When I first visited Yucatán in 1923, I watched Governor Felipe Corrallo Puerto playing baseball with some Indians to whom he talked in Mayan. And when I asked him why he was so interested in the game, he replied "people that play will not be slaves and slaves do not play." This is exactly 45 years ago. In these years Mexico has been taken possession of by a cultural, social, economic and political Renaissance. In fact, it is the only country in the world of which this can now be said. The

requires freedom for both the body and the spirit and an environment
Renaissance was made possible by the humane spirit of its revolution.
I do not know of a single person killed for ideological reasons - though
the revolution cost a million lives and lasted many bloody years. The
revolution united the people of Mexico with their past. It gave them an
identity with the tradition of their Indian forefathers and a sense of
continuity. The Mexicans who built the Ciudad Universitaria could only
have been those who had in the past constructed the pyramids of Teotihuacan
and the new Museum of Anthropology could only have been designed by the
heirs of the artists who contrived the palaces of Bonampak. I am not trying
to praise Mexico or glorify its people. But when I first saw Mexico City 45
years ago it could not have housed the Olympic Games that will be here -
this year. The changes have not been physical only - they have been social,
economic, political, cultural and moral. They have given the people of -
this land a true pride in themselves and in their achievements; like the
ancient Greeks they could say of those who are not Mexicans that they are
barbarians. For the interesting feature of these profound changes visible
to the eye in architecture, art, music, literature and poetry, and in the
social and political life is that they have not been at the cost of the
elements of spontaneity, of play, of freedom. There is a richness in the
cultural variety in this land - ^{not} just in the frescos that you see on the
walls or the buildings in the large cities but in folk arts that differ
from village to village, where dress, custom, tradition and even the
language may be local, unique, that has remained free and unregimented.

One can only hope that this modern miracle of a cultural
renaissance where men are free to play with colors, themes, forms, concepts,
and ideas in as many ways as the human imagination will allow, can go on
its way to increased economic well being without losing its spontaneity,
its freedom, the elements of play and fun so visible in the popular arts
and in the work of its great artists. The spirit of the Olympic Games

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