

Playing together

Susan Fish

They called themselves The Church of Grover’s Corners, the group of friends who gathered regularly to read aloud the play *Our Town*, which is set in the fictional town of Grover’s Corners.¹ I decided I needed some

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of their version of church when we approached my least favorite day of the year—the day after the autumn time change. A diverse group gathered in my living room, and we drew names out of a hat to assign roles before reading Act 1 of *Our Town*. We took a break for soup, read Act 2, ate dessert, and then read Act 3.

Over the next year or so, I gathered different people for similar events. People as young as seventeen and as old as

eighty-three read Charles Dickens, a contemporary mystery, and a Shakespearean comedy of love.

Then the pandemic struck, and there were no more gatherings.

My job as the acting children’s ministries coordinator at my real church came to an end, too. I had entered that role with preconceived notions about what a children’s ministry coordinator was like. They should most definitely have an active Pinterest account and be super-good at crafts. And they should say words like “super-good” often.

But I began to apply lessons I had learned many years ago when I taught at a private school. The school’s founder, Friedrich Froebel, believed we are all made in the image of God to be creative and to play. Froebel wrote that play “is not trivial, it is highly serious and of deep significance.” And he observed further that “the spontaneous play of the child discloses the future inner life” of the adult.² Adopting this philoso-

1 See <https://louisvillerenaisissanceproject.com/2019/05/02/the-church-of-grovers-corners>.

2 Friedrich Froebel, *The Education of Man*, translated by W. N. Hailmann (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1907), 55.

phy helped me in this last year to realize my ideas about children's ministry were misguided: children are not simply cute but are people on a spiritual journey whose path to God is through their play.

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Playing in the midst of pandemic

At first, I struggled as COVID-19 spread across the world. I watched a friend set up a field hospital, another who works as a cardiac nurse, and others helping refugees or low-income folks. These seemed noble tasks and ways of incarnating Jesus in a very broken world—but also things I could not do.


Then, one of the attendees from one of the play nights suggested I try hosting one online. It was about a month into quarantine, and by this time we were all well acquainted with Zoom fatigue. But I agreed to

try, with an idea about a play that would resonate—an Agatha Christie closed-room mystery—since we were all kind of stuck in a room with a killer stalking us.

Suspecting that reading a three-act play virtually would be a long slog, we decided to read an act a week, with no one reading ahead in the script. A dozen people gathered online, most of them strangers to one another.

What was most surprising was how life giving and *fun* this playing was for all. The first night, I could not sleep for

hours, drunk on the heady brew of laughing together, something I had nearly forgotten. The next week, I started to see what made this work: unlike most Zoom calls where people need to make conversation, a play gives us a script to operate from; at the same time, unlike merely watching Netflix, every participant needs to be exactly that, a participant, fully engaged in the process of co-creating and discovering the plot. By the time we finished the end of Act 3, no one wanted to get off the call, and instead we stayed on, talking to our playmates about life and death and stories and relationships.



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The play of perichoresis

Twice more, I hosted different groups reading the same play, and each time, the same thing happened. I pulled together a fourth group. Our last night was one of the most intense nights of protests against racial violence. I wondered whether people would show up. When they did, and we did our weekly check-in, I asked whether doing this in the face of all that was happening in the world was frivolous or necessary. No one thought it was unimportant.

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It is easy to see the temporal and eternal value of nurses and pastors and social workers and to see play as “the childish ways” we put behind us as we grow up (1 Corinthians 13:11, KJV). But after a year of working with kids and

valuing their play, followed by these remarkable evenings, I have become convinced of the vital importance of play for all people—indeed, that we become more like God when we play.

There’s a theological concept called perichoresis, which names how the Father created the Son, how the movements of love between them are the Spirit, how it is the nature of love to create, and how out of the dance (or play) of this love came all creation.

The monk and mystic Thomas Merton once wrote, “What in God might appear to us as ‘play’ is perhaps what He Himself takes most seriously. At any rate the Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of His creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance.”³

Merton has a point: unlike children who just play, too often either we dismiss play as lacking meaning or we try to impose meaning on it. When I think about Jesus saying, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3, NIV), I think back to the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire*, where Olympic runner and future missionary Eric Liddell explains his running to his disapproving sister, saying, “God made me fast, . . . and when I run I feel His pleasure.”

3 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 261.

I also think about what the mystery writer P. D. James once said in an interview: “To say that I am a Christian writer suggests that I write to propagate the faith or to explain my own spiritual life. I don’t. I write detective stories and I write them as well as I can. I love the form, I love the structure, and within that I hope I say something true about human beings, about life. Inevitably my own view of life which is fundamentally religious tends to come through.”⁴

Playing at church

The group that inspired me called themselves The Church at Grover’s Corners. It is tricky these days to be the church when we cannot physically

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gather, share communion, sing together, or do all the many things that are part of an incarnational faith. But just as we question whether the image of God is a physical matter or whether it goes deeper, so I’ve been challenged to wonder about the nature of the church through playing together with these folks. These experiences of play, though virtual, have a real depth and honesty to them that I rarely experience in church. Some of those participating are believers, while others would never step foot in a church. But as we play and laugh together, we

also share bits of our lives together and talk about baptism and punishment. We reflect on the issues of the day, with the same play being as different as the day on which we read it.

One of the chief qualities of play is the element of surprise. It is why not knowing what’s coming in the play has been a key part of this. It explains the delight I felt that first evening and still feel every time I gather to play with people. It makes me believe that God is in this. I think of the scene in the children’s book *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, when two of the children go to see the slain body of Aslan, only to be stunned that he is no longer dead but alive.

What happens next is how I want to close, with a picture of what God invites us to in play:

⁴ Interview by Martin Wroe in *Books and Culture*, March/April 1998, 14–15.

A mad chase began. Round and round the hill-top he led them, now hopelessly out of their reach, now letting them almost catch his tail, now diving between them, now tossing them in the air with his huge and beautifully velvety paws and catching them again, and now stopping unexpectedly so that all three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia; and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind. And the funny thing was that when all three finally lay together panting in the sun the girls no longer felt in the least tired or hungry or thirsty.⁵

About the author

Susan Fish is a writer who writes and plays from the front porch of the home in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, which she shares with her husband, dog, and three young adult children. She is embarking on a Master of Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College this fall. She is super bad at crafts.

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 164.