

A playful path

“A playful path is the shortest road to happiness.”

- the Oaqui

When you are playful, when you are feeling, being playful, you are walking a playful path. When you are having fun, when you are graceful, when you are in harmony with your self in the world, when you feel alive, when you are delighted and delightful, surprised and surprising, loving, caring; you are dancing on a playful path. When you are playing, when you are at play, in play, when you are fully playing, when you are playing playfully, you are creating a playful path.

When you stop playing, stop being playful, when you become inflexible, unresponsive, insensitive, humorless, fearful, frenzied, you are on some other path entirely.

For adults, following a playful path is a practice, something you put into practice, and then practice some more. When you were a kid, it wasn't a practice. It was what you did, always. You had to be reminded not to be playful. And you were. O, yes, you were. But now that you have become what you, as a kid, called “an adult,” you find that play is something you have to remind your self to do, playful something you have to allow your self to be.

And once you again take up that playful path you knew so well, you discover that it's different, you're different. You can play much more deeply than you could before. You are stronger, you understand more, you have more power, better toys. You discover that you, as a playful being, can choose a different way of being. A way of being as large as life. A way of being you, infinitely.

The Path

I'll be the first to admit, well, maybe not the first, but I'm admitting it anyway: it's not that easy to be playful. Certainly not for adults, and, from time to time, not even for children. It's easier for dogs, maybe. Puppies, certainly. But even they, if they feel threatened or sick or hungry, fall off the path. Yes, for sure, they get back on it as soon as they can, often with a vengeance. We, the mature ones, not so much. We're too busy playing inside. And outside are things like work and not enough money and too much war. So our kids ask us if we want to play, and we say "no." Sometimes we even get angry at them for disturbing us, as if there are things in our lives that are more important than theirs.

So, I've been looking for things we can do to stay in the daily game a little longer, to leave it a little less easily, to come back to it more readily. I make jokes, do funny stuff, play with toys, play games. But when I'm really off, path-wise, really far off, somewhere depressingly else entirely, I sometimes have trouble getting my self to play or joke around or smile, even. I get angry when I could be laughing, serious when I could be playful. The invitation to play is there, the gift wrapped in sparkles of promise, but I send it back unopened. I mean, I even turn down opportunities to have fun, if you can imagine that.

Which brings us to appreciation and gratitude.

These are what you might call "openers." When you can appreciate anyone, when you can be thankful for any thing, it opens you, like playfulness opens you. It opens you to some place near the core of you. And you can receive again. Feel again. Respond from your playful center again.

I like it when we appreciate things and people and animals and life and stuff. It makes it more fun.

I'm not sure if things are more fun if we appreciate them or if we appreciate them because they are fun. Like we find our selves about to eat a very delicious-looking and -smelling piece of, uh, portobello mushroom, wild-

caught, even, and we pause just as we are about to impale the first bite upon our conceptually drooling fork, just to appreciate the portobello-ish moment and all the enjoyment therewith implied. Maybe to inhale the olfactory bliss of the clarified buttery sauce of it all a little more deeply, to observe the firm, glistening, fleshy 'shroom aglow with premonitory pleasure; or to meditate on the honed sensibilities of the chef who selected this very port- that brought us this bellaness, or all the living beauty it once possessed. (Sometimes I almost regret that I am about to take so much enjoyment from eating something that was once alive. And then I take that bite and I am all about the appreciation thing.)

Then there's post-appreciating. Appreciating the memory of it, savoring the satisfaction of it all. Ah, the sheer pleasure of pleasure, almost as pleasant in memory as it is in deed, indeed.

It's like what you get when you give someone that perfect gift. Not so much that you get appreciated. But that the gift does. Not so much because of all the trouble and expense you went through to get it. But because of the joy that it brings, the delight, the glee. Which make you appreciate the giving almost as much as you appreciate the receiving. Which makes the memory of the giving almost as enjoyable as the giving itself.

I think if I had been the One who created the world, and the mushroom, and the fire and fork, I wouldn't be after praise or gratitude. I think what I'd want most to see is my gifts being enjoyed, appreciated, savored.

I like how the financial world uses the word. For them, appreciation means increasing in value. I think that's what happens for us when we appreciate some-thing or -one. It gets better. More precious. More fun.

Both Merriam and Webster think the synonyms for appreciation are: gratefulness, thanks, thankfulness, and for thankful: blissful, delighted, gratified, happy, joyful, joyous, pleased, satisfied, glad, tickled. Yup. You get thankful, you start appreciating things and people and life – and there you are, back again, delighted, gratified, happy, joyful, joyous, pleased, satisfied, glad, tickled, even. Right smack dab in the middle of a playful path.

Following your Playful Path

Following a playful path is not as much about being playful as it is about your being aware of playfulness: your own playfulness, of wherever you see manifestations of playfulness. It's about noticing playfulness, noticing when you're not playful, noticing when you're not as playful as you want to be, or wish you were, or wish you had been.

Playfulness is like that. It comes from the center of your being, from whatever your soul and mind and heart and body are centered on.

You don't have to be playful to be on a playful path. It helps. But it helps just as much if you only notice playfulness in others. It helps even if you just notice that at this particular moment, at this particular time, you're just not feeling very playful, and you don't even want to be playing. You're, what, grumpy, tired, feeling pressured, busy, focused, doing something too important to be playing around with.

It's like traveling any other path. It's always about noticing where you are, where you're going. It's a journey. And the more you notice, the more present you are; and the more present you are, the closer you are: to your self, to life, to the world.

You often find a playful path in the middle, or maybe close to the edges of other paths; many of which have nothing at all to do with being playful. Sure, you'd expect to find it if you were following a child's path, or a dog's, or maybe an actor's, or artist's, or musician's. But sometimes you find that playful path right smack dab in the middle of a scientist's path, or a mathematician's, or on a spiritual path – without any of those paths getting any less scientific or mathematical or spiritual, or the playful path getting any less playful. Often, surprisingly often, both paths, the playful one and whatever other path you happen to be on or just crossing, deepen each other, strengthen each other. And it's the best. The best. And then, for a time, because of the very nature of playfulness, they, and you, go their separate way.

You follow a playful path because playfulness is an aspect of your self, your life, your world. And the more often, the more clearly you see it, the more present you are to playfulness, the more present it is in you.

No guardrails hath the path

There's at least one good reason that, guardrail-wise, there are none that the playful path hath: because there are times when being playful is not so useful, and path-wise, you just have to get off, immediately.

For example, when you're operating on someone. Even if you're actually a surgeon, there are moments when you have to get off the playful path and focus entirely on the one thing your hands are doing. Sure, sure, there's almost always room for jokes and music and kidding around, except when there's not. And if the playful path had guardrails or even a medial strip, if there were anything between your seriousness and your playfulness, anything that kept you playful when you need not to be, and vice versa, it wouldn't be fun, really, ever. Because fun and freedom go together like, well, freedom and fun.

It's an off and on kind of thing, this playful path. Sometimes you're not playful enough. Sometimes, you're too playful. When you need to get off or on, you really don't want anything standing in your way at all ever. And it's a good thing. Except when you wander a little too far off - which happens, believe you me. And your playful part gets a little lost. And the rest of you gets a little lonely. So, you surround your self with reminders: friends, a spouse or two, pets, kids, joke books, puzzles, toys, happy pith, playful hats, music, photos, online life-lovers. And the best of them, the ones you cherish, show you the way back.

It is indirect, this playful path

To get from point A to point B, you frequently find your self having to go through point C.

Sometimes it's fun. Sometimes it's funny. Sometimes it's transcendent, transmogrifying, transubstantiating, trance-like. More often, it's dance-like, like finding your self in a free form dance where everybody is your partner, or a square dance where everyone is a caller, with music so live that the musicians are as finely tuned to their instruments as they are to each other as they are to the dancers.

Sometimes it's seriously playful, like the way an artist plays: totally focused, utterly devoted, and yet, always listening, yielding when the medium seems to push back, released from expectation, from judgment, released into the moment of play, of playing with, of being played with, playing along and along, playing until the work itself stops playing.

Other times the path gets very narrow, and to keep from going off into what appears to be chaos or oblivion or endless boredom you have to pay very careful attention to every step or glide or leap.

But most of the time the path is wide - so wide it doesn't matter where you go, and the music, and the joy take you everywhere.

Life and death on your playful path

Even without you, your playful path is never empty. There's always something or someone there to discover, to invite you to play.

There are things you've left and things you've found and things you pretended and things you just forgot.

Some things are just plain junk - those you can make toys out of, or make a game out of, or look at, or take along with you, or just watch them, or lie on them, shelter under them.

Then there are the things you need to learn to play around - not play with, play around: like the things that make you itch or are very sharp or fragile.

Some things are obstacles; too big to move, too heavy. Those things you can try to jump over or dig under or climb.

Some of these things are pretend. Some are not.

There's life on your playful path, and lots of it. Some of the living things on your path might not even be particularly playful, or playworthy, or safe, even. Most are. They want to play with you, want to love you, want to make you laugh. Some, for some reason, want to hurt you. Some hurt, are hurting. And some, sometimes, go away, and sometimes die. And sometimes, the hurting dying things are the very things that love you.

And that's just too much to play with or around. Too much for anyone. Not right away. Not right after.

It's fun to play dead. But when some living, loving thing really dies, or leaves you, right in the middle of the game, right where it used to be so much fun to play together; you discover that you don't feel like playing any more. Not right then. You don't have to get off the path entirely. But you do have to stop playing, to take it in. You have to let the grief in. You might even have to let the anger in, the depression, the tears, the screams. Because, player that you are, you understand that you have to give your self over, completely, as totally and freely as a child might: to the grief like to the game, to the pain like to the fun. Player that you are, you embrace it and let it embrace you, naked, without protection. Because when you are completely grieving, like when you are completely playing, you are still complete.

It is only when you stop receiving, when you stop letting your self feel, when you separate your self from the pain that you have to leave the path; and die, a little, too.

The path, the poop. and the wasp

There, in the very midst of my personal playful path, I found a small, yet salient poop offering. I walked on, playfully, as is my custom, awash in the humor and yet unplumbed significance of it all, only to discover that my path had directed me back to the poop, and to the trash can beyond, wherein, fortuitously lay a swath of clean newspaper just ample enough for semi-sanitary poop-handling.

So, paper in hand, I returned to the poop, as we all must do. I laid the paper over the poop, and wrapped it, o so assiduously, and let the path take me playfully back to the receptacle of anonymous waste, wherein I somewhat gleefully surrendered the poop.

Thereafter, the path returned me. I passed, with something like smugness, the now reclaimed pooplessness of it all, musing lightly on the goodness of my deed.

Approximately 50 metric yards thereafter, I found my self facing a far more profound test. For there, actually smack in the middle of my resumed path, lay a far more profound and expressive offering of canine nonchalance.

Nearby, as it happened, walked a dog-walker, who, by the kind of happenstance that happens when you're standing on a playful path, had upon her wrist a dispenser of poop bags. I directed her attention to my new self-evident duty, and suggested to her that she might want to donate a poop bag towards my mission. And she, uncannily, gave me two.

Thanking her with a perfusion of thanks, I effused my way back to my newfound poop pile, and, charged with a sense of civic, shall we say, duty; I proceeded to engage in poop-removal-like behaviors, only to discover that yes, I needed both bags, and then some.

While I leave you to contemplate the uncomfortable consequences of the thensomeness of it all, suffice it to say that I accomplished the mission, dumped the bags, and wiped the residue on a secluded patch of grass, shortly thereafter resuming my blissful progress along my playful path, which had become, due to my diligence, doody free.

I didn't reach the conclusion of this particular episode until the next day. 'Twas another lovely day, and my path beckoned to yet further adventures in playfulness. This time, I began with purpose. I marched my self towards the thoughtfully-provided poop-bag dispenser for civic-minded dog-walkers, and sought out the roll of sanitary poop bags as advertised therein. I couldn't help but notice that the bottom section of the dispenser had been apparently repurposed to function as a receptacle for used tissues. And so (I'm about to get to the point of this entire conceptual perambulation), and so, I reach into the top half of the aforementioned dispenser, only to find

that it, too, had been repurposed —by a vagrant gang of wasps.

I was immediately struck by the speed of their response to my hand's presence, and, returning to my path with admirable alacrity, I was sorely impressed by the amount of venom released in that millisecond of our encounter. And so, perforce abandoning my poop-patrol, I returned the path, and, whilst sucking assiduously on my wound, found my self saying to my self: "this, then, too is revelation: there's the path, there's the act of caring, the playful pleasure of doing good without reward or reason, there's the poop, and there's the wasp."

A squirrel explains a playful path

The other day, when I was thinking about a playful path (which I try to do as often as possible – about, you know, what it feels like when I’m on or off it, what you might call its “spiritual topography”), I met a squirrel who, for the duration of our meeting (OK, not so much a meeting, but an encounter, you know, each of us stilled in our awareness of the other), seemed, naturally, to be there to answer the very question I wasn’t quite asking.

So alive, so filled with life this squirrel seemed to be (as all living squirrels seem to be – you know, a lot of scampering, a lot of sudden sitting up, taking notice) talking to me, standing there for something (I’ve always admired squirrels for that – not just for their gloriously bounding grace, for their seeming celebration of anything – but especially for their, you know, playfulness: like when they chase each other round and round a tree, double-helixing their way up and down and up – such athletes, so committed, so completely engaged), patiently illustrating what a playful path was really like:

Not so much like what you’d call a path or a road or a winding trail, the squirrel explained, but something three-dimensional, with branches everywhere, more like, wouldn’t you know it, a tree, whose bifurcating ways, even though they seem to be growing in every possible direction, each lead to the light.

Not a grown-up path, not a flat path like you would find on a map, but a path whose playfulness is very much like the path you probably perceived when you were a child: many-branched, multi-dimensional, where you could leap from here to anywhere and never lose your way, always be found.