

Life is Play

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When I was a teenager, I briefly dated a boy who said these crucial words to me:

“Life is play”

Slightly older than me, he was already quite the hedonist and had introduced me to any number of fairly self-indulgent and quite possibly illegal practices, but the basic message stuck with me...we have to have enjoyment to be complete and part of that enjoyment comes with allowing for freedom and lightness, creativity and spontaneity. It is quite fitting in my mind that our theme for this month is “play” and that it is also Pride Month. If there is one thing that I have learned from my journey as a gay man and as part of the LGBTQ community is that life is play.

Let me be clear, sometimes being part of this community is immediately equated with wild abandon, lax morals and irresponsibility. That’s not where I’m going. Sexual orientation is not an indicator of someone’s lack of impulse control any more than gender, race or cultural background. I will say however, from personal experience, that having to publicly position one’s self in relationship to a set of societal norms that do not resonate with you on a basic organic level, makes you very, very aware of when, where and how pleasure arrives in your life. Yes, pleasure can be sex, in all of its many forms; but you learn as well that pleasure can be recognition. Enjoyment may be experiencing community where you don’t have to translate or explain your journey, feelings or experiences. Lightness can be wearing clothes that don’t work against how you see and feel yourself.

But really, play is so much more than that...and as a society, we’re pretty bad at it. Like so much of how we live in the West, play is most accessible to people based on wealth or access to privilege. Sports, summer homes, travel, music...these are all more easily engaged in our society when you’ve literally got the price of the ticket. Another tough aspect of play is that too often, as adults, we learn to think of play as competition. I did

a simple google search for the “principles of play” and come up with way too many titles of reports that included words like “attack” and “defense”. It stands to reason that we have so much violence in this country when the only way we know to play is by playing “war”.

Play is so much more than that...watching children careen from idea to idea, from color to shape, from scenario to scenario...constantly creating worlds and games and reasons to care and reasons to laugh. Play is so much more than we let it be as adults.

Games for games sake. Expression for expressions sake celebration and full exercise of being...this is play. As adults, we learn to attach so much meaning to everything. We learn to think in terms of consequences and strategies for goals. It is hard for us to let go of reading into everything we experience. It is hard for us to justify the “lost” time, idling away at something purely playful. We are willing to watch a movie or television series, but we do so as a tool of relaxation, or education or information. What is more, we become dependent on these produced resources to create stories for us and take us on journeys that were once easy for us to go on as children without media and a multi-million dollar budget.

I think the most important lesson I learned as a child was how to value creativity. That impulse that was instilled in me by my parents, guides everything I do. I am always looking for the unexpected potential in everything, every one and every situation. When you are taught at an early age to deeply value creativity, there’s a switch that flips in your mind that turns from “can’t” to “possibly”. I’m not just talking about your personal creativity but the capacity to recognize creativity and creation everywhere. It doesn’t surprise me that some of this country’s most notable diplomats have also been creative people...I will let you google that data point but the fact that Antony Blinken has a band and Condoleeza Rice is not only a pianist but was also a figure skater, is completely unsurprising. Regardless of political leanings, diplomacy requires one to always be able to think first in terms of “possibly”. I would happily spend time on a playground with either of them.

Growing up gay and growing into the world of LGBTQ community, I had my impulses toward “possibly” powerfully reinforced out of necessity. Even though I didn’t grow up in

an environment that supported my sexuality, and even though I got many many negative messages about what it meant to be gay, it became clear to me that survival would have to come from someplace within. It required drawing on every resource I possessed of imagining what was possible. I had to imagine myself in a place where I could be me. I had to imagine what it would feel like to be loved the way I wanted to be loved. It was a constant hour to hour battle that I was incredibly lucky to arrive on the other side of. And I call it luck because I had friends smarter and more creative than me who were not that lucky and did not make it. Too many LGBTQ folks including people in my world, died and still die by suicide. Too many LGBTQ folks engage in self harm through substances and toxic sexual interactions...or are forced to do so for survival. I give thanks every single day for the accident of my survival.

And in honor of every single one of those people who tried desperately but couldn't make it, not because they were weak or incapable, but because of what this all too hard world is, in honor of them, I say, let life be play. This is something that I learned from so many LGBTQ elders, Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, ACT UP Activists, attorneys at Lambda Legal, leaders of Pride movements and organizations. For every life that is challenged into non-existence, they offer the promise of hope and the right to living, not to work, but to play. Finding humor in tragedy, absurdity in conflict, reality in imagination. My heroes and champions in the LGBTQ community operate in the constant space of "possibly". Without it, they would give up and that is not an option.

As we move through Pride Month this year, don't just make this about LGBTQ people, but try to understand more about the spirit that keeps the LGBTQ community moving forward. It is a spirit that may have bright colors and wild costumes sometimes, but behind all that is a powerful, complex, thriving and abundant mandate for total humanity...joy, pleasure, hope, tragedy, beauty, disaster. It is a world of "possibly" summed up in three words:

Life is play.

-ALD