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What Life Is in the Modern Era

This life is a game proceeding before us.

—Gandhi, *Interpretation of the Bhagavadgita*

“Life is one big dress-up,” says Muffy VanderBear. For those who aren’t familiar with the VanderBears, they are professedly the best-dressed teddy bears in the American stuffed animal kingdom. For my wife Priya, a psychologist, and for her mother, Phyllis—who devoutly collect, dress, and nurture the VanderBear family—life is a conscious medium for play.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Catholic Church dominated European education and schools, and strict measures were enforced to ban all forms of play and humor. The church issued the following decree:

We prohibit play in the strongest terms. The students shall rise at five o’clock in the morning, summer and winter. The students shall be indulged with nothing which the world calls play. Children shall be instructed in this matter in such a way as to show them, through the presentation of religious principles, the

wastefulness and folly of all play. The reward of those who seek earthly things is tears and sorrow.¹

For many people in the Christian world, existence—including play—evolved as a somber and rueful business, as the following story vividly illustrates:

The Elks of Sporthaven

On a foggy Saturday afternoon in March of 1998, the Benevolent Protective Order of Elks chapter in the little fishing town Sporthaven, Oregon, inaugurated new officers. In a colorful ceremony, fifty-five-year-old Phil, a local merchant, became the new exalted ruler. Stocky and proud, wearing a jeweled coronet, Phil stood under the crossed swords, with large medals hanging from his necklace, gold-rimmed glasses, and a modern bow tie, and received the “royal gavel” with serious eyes and a tight-lipped smile.

The new officers were mostly local vendors. Queuing up in their rented attire, they placed their left hands over their chests, raised their right hands, and solemnly swore to take their new stations in the organization. They were presented with jewelry that represented their new positions.

The chairperson of the board reported the end of a good year. The funds continued to roll in, he said, and new people were joining. Rod, the head of the bingo games, was proclaimed “Elk of the Year.”

Over a cup of coffee, I reviewed the faces of the players on the front page of the morning newspaper. The photographs taken at the Elks ceremony revealed tension and anxiety, not fun. The tame smile didn’t hide Phil’s heavy burden from the cameras: I promise to serve our society; I will do everything to maintain Rod’s precedence in the Bingo program.

Phil, Rod, and their friends became Elks probably to create a balance in their lives by adding play. Now they will need a vacation to get away from it. Phil will ski, and Rod will play tennis. But all of the activities today are competitive and assiduous, and gone again is the sought balance between work and play. Strain, not release and fun, permeates both.

The Elks ceremony serves as a simple illustration of the contention made by the psychiatrist Adam Blatner and his wife that a

good deal of what we call “culture” is based on play activities; that one of the most obvious things about people is that they play.² Whenever we interact, we play a game with each other. Only we do not treat that as play. Observed closely, our ceremonies and rituals, and the socioeconomic and political activities of our numerous clubs and organizations, are games humans play. Although taken seriously, these games are not motivated by a need for physical survival, but by a basic instinct to play.

We play to add stimulation and meaning to everyday activities.

In fiction and in games paupers can become rulers, placing a crown on their heads and a gavel in their hands. In a democracy, unless it is play, people—whether they are middle class or elite—do not become royalty and knights.

In play, our boundless imagination can be expressed and manifested. This is noble, for within each of us there is an undeniable demand for joy. But as soon as we take the game too seriously, it translates into an obligation, and that usually robs the activity of its fun, merriment, and joy.

The World as a Stage

The world is a stage, and every man and woman is an actor.

—Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

William Shakespeare’s celebrated message is repeated in all of his plays. In one great text after another he labors to show how all men and women act out the scripts of their roles and destinies in the theater of life, most of the time consciously, sometimes unconsciously.

Shakespeare’s famous view of life as play is not unique to him. The great American essayist and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, echoed Shakespeare’s attitude. As a practicing Unitarian minister he liked to preach, and as a prolific writer and lecturer he dominated the literary society in New England for more than thirty years. In one of his most quoted adages he describes the human environment as a spectacle. He tells us: Observe the passersby—as you ride in a coach, they look like a fleeting puppet show.

Plotinus taught neo-Platonic philosophy in the third century and was a profound Roman thinker. He treated all realms of daily life—political, economic, religious, military, sex, even crime—as

theatrical episodes. Together, he said, they form the single grand performance of life:

If in form the world resembles an organism, all that happens in the world is comparable to a drama on stage. Death is a change of roles. The conflicts among individuals indicate that everything in human life is a game. As on a stage, we must consider the murders, the different kinds of deaths, the conquest and pillage of cities, all as mere changes of scenes.³

We can imagine Plotinus lecturing to his students: Everything, including grief and lamentation, are acts of a plot.⁴

Bob Hope and the Knights of St. Gregory the Great with Star

The comic perspective on human existence is particularly close at hand in this play world of sociability.

—Peter L. Berger, *The Precarious Vision*

To fully grasp the theatrical character of human society, as a large dramatic production, let us look at another picture in our collective photo album:

It was Wednesday, 10 June 1998, in Los Angeles. The Catholic Church honored Bob Hope for his financial contributions. The famous film star and his wife Dolores were inducted into the Order of St. Gregory the Great with Star (what a designation!), one of the highest papal knighthoods (what a title!). Eighty-nine-year-old Dolores became the third female knight in St. Gregory's Order, and Bob, at the age of ninety-five, became the seventh male member of the society's chapter in Los Angeles, during a lavish costume party orchestrated by the cardinal.

Similar awards, honors, and ceremonies take place in various organizations and communities every day. They are carnivals of masks and dramatized games that mark the playful aspect of our societies. They could serve as a wonderful source of fun, were they not approached as merely political, social, or economic functions. However, it is politically correct to believe that responsible adults must always be serious, especially about what we consider important things.

Educators and philosophers like to remind us that we are social animals. We live in a community with others rather than in isola-

tion. Consequently we depend on each other for everything. Psychologically we exist for, and find meaning for our lives in, the activities and customs of the large groups we belong to.

A society is like a puzzle board. Every individual is an interlocking piece that somehow fits on the board. We are kept in place by the other pieces that surround us. We are born into a society and we cannot live independently of it, be it conceptually, practically, or emotionally. Our lives without a society is inconceivable to us. We can fantasize about it, but it wouldn't be a reality. And as all the interlocking pieces fit on the puzzle board, society is not about love. We are in it not because we love human beings. I doubt that most of us do. Unconditional love exists only in isolation where there are no other human beings but oneself. It does not even exist in monasteries and ashrams, as those like myself who have spent time in them have found out. It is difficult to love the human species. The nicest-sounding commandment, yet the most nonsensical, is to love others as ourselves. I am more compassionate and accepting toward my neighbors than I am toward myself. With myself I am as I *really* am, a tamed beast.

But I am a social beast. I exist not only *in* society, but *for* society. I live for the drama I create in the groups I belong to, for the impressions I manage to produce on others, and for the attention I manage to generate from other pieces in the puzzle. I would gladly die today if I only knew I could stay around to watch the impact that my death spawns around me.

As human beings, everything we do, every decision and desire we generate, is triggered and shaped by how other humans would respond, approve, or disapprove. We are so conditioned to tune into the will and wishes of society that not only are the feelings and opinions of our immediate family and friends crucial to us, but also the impression we make on complete strangers we cross in the streets.

We are entertainers. We garb ourselves; some of us paint their hair in purple and green, or drill holes in their ears and lips and noses. We give each other medals and titles and beautifully packaged greeting cards and gifts. Some of us go to great lengths to organize parties, dinners, and social clubs, where we can wear costumes and make an effort to impress people. Afterward we go

home and recharge the reservoir of energy that got drained in being polite, amicable, and loving.

My father once said that if I live long enough, I will reach the stage in which *nothing* will ever surprise me. I must have arrived at that phase. Life lost its hold over me. When it no longer has a grip over us, when it no longer scares or intimidates us, we begin to do things because we are compelled to do them.

However, we convince ourselves that everything we do is important in order to make everything we do, and everything that happens to us, count for something. In his remarkable book, *A Philosophy of Play*, Dr. Luther Halsey Gulick offers an excellent example. A father comes home from work and finds his nine-year-old daughter busy writing something. Her face and hand movements clearly indicated great concentration and extreme tension:

“What are you doing?” He asks his little girl.

“Please don’t disturb me,” she replies without lifting her head. “I’m doing something very important. I’m on the entertainment committee of the Saturday Afternoon Club, and I’m writing the program.”⁵

Contemporary educators increasingly believe that viewing life with humor, embracing ourselves and our society much less solemnly than we presently do, may be a possible road to happiness and cooperation.

Our daily lives may be “fought” as though we live on a battlefield, or enacted as a game. Even a game, when conducted as a matter of life-and-death, is no longer a “game”; it is a battle that turns the game, and life, into a struggle and conflict. Conversely, when winning a war becomes secondary to the experience of adventure, it can indeed become a game. As the sociologist Peter Berger reminds us, taking our costume parties too seriously means, by its very nature, missing an essential aspect of our political reality.⁶

Mirna, the Queen of Azaleas

The more profound double sense of “social game” is that not only the game is played in a society as its external medium, but that, with its help, people actually play society.

—Georg Simmel (famed German sociologist)

The small seaside town where we used to reside provides many examples of social drama. About 5,500 people live there, many fishermen and a handful of merchants and civil servants.

Once a year, in May, the community is celebrating an Azalea Festival. It is the central event of the year. High school girls compete for the title of Azalea Queen. Tension mounts as the date gets nearer:

"I'm excited, and ready to represent the community," said Robin, one of the five finalists in 1998, to the local media. "I grew up in this town, and the Azalea princesses were my role models. Now I'm a role model for other girls."

The young Azalea "princesses" take this role seriously.

In a personal interview, the board of judges told each contestant:

"You have just been hired by a leading TV station. Your job is to sell a service or product. Pick a product or service and sell it to us now."

Princess A decides that she wants to sell computers to the judges. Another markets aerobics. Princess C chooses to be the public relations agent for the local chamber of commerce. The fourth offers a particular toothpaste. And the future queen fancies the role of a salesperson for a hair-growing product. Naturally, these were the young princesses' unbiased ideas.

The coronation of the queen takes place about a month before the festival. In a precisely detailed ceremony, the princesses walk down the aisle escorted by formally uniformed Coast Guardsmen, awaiting with anxiety the announcement of the winner. Mirna, a lovely blond, daughter of a local dentist, bursts into tears as her name is proclaimed. She has just become the Azalea queen, and the local crowd cheers enthusiastically. She wipes her tears of joy with her white-gloved hands; then, escorted by her prosperous and proud father, she waves Elizabeth-like.⁷

"Within the social drama one is given the opportunity to stretch beyond one's expected parameters,"⁸ says Dr. Robert Landy.

Landy is a drama therapist and a professor of psychotherapy at New York University. He believes that social drama is the foundation on which human society functions, and the source of all of the roles that we play as individual members and as communities. Role-play, rituals, costumes, and masks are essential components of our social drama. Also of human play.

Daily Living through Role-Play

Our way of life resembles a fair. The greater part of the crowd comes to buy and sell, and a few come only to look. Know all of you, who are busied with land, slaves and public posts, that these are nothing but fodder for a comedian's routine.

—Epictetus (popular Roman philosopher and
freed slave)

Playing life takes many forms. There is hardly a moment in which we do not play some sort of role. We continually dramatize characters in order to fulfill duties. Much of the time we perform for others—we are, for each other, both accomplices and audience. And sometimes we are our own audience. Whether a writer or a businessperson, rich or homeless, famous or anonymous, we play parts in the grand theater of life. And in each role that we perform, we enact a script that we have learned from our society in the course of the ongoing training that make us civilized human beings. As we mature into adulthood, our culture and environment provide us with manuscripts and shape the roles that we continue to perform for the rest of our lives. We become actors. And when this process becomes unconscious and automatic, when we no longer think about it, the role we play no longer feels like a personification but as an identity.

And yet, when I speak to an audience I perform the role of a speaker, a sage, or an expert. I don't mumble, I choose my words carefully, I coax the audience to think—so much, but not too much—I don't sprawl in the chair, and I make hand and facial gestures to imitate enthusiasm. I deliberately stage a persona. I act the character that I wish to present.

Many of us recognize that practically everything we do is a performance. Most of the time we are conscious of the particular characters we wish to present. Even when we are not fully aware of our dramatization—mostly in intimate circumstances—a part deep within our being still knows that we are acting. We do it because that is how our society functions.

I sport the part of a husband when I am with my wife, and when I talk about her even if she is absent. Suppose I didn't want to impersonate a spouse but rather *be* it, I wouldn't know what this means. I'm familiar with the contents of this role, all that it

entails, simply because my environment taught me. It has become one of my personas, one of the masks that I wear regularly.

Similarly, I portray a neighbor, a salesperson, a consumer, a voter, and an author. I know how to act these parts because I'm civilized; I practiced a hundred scripts. I'm never out of a role; I always present myself in some way, even when I'm alone. By becoming a conscious actor I can be a better role-player, which helps me become more *productive*, more *efficient*, more *creative*, and have more fun in the process. Not a bad payoff.

A Vitamin Called "Viewing Life as a Game"

Play should interest our contemporary world more than perhaps it does. Not only in the United States, but all over the world, man is much concerned with freedom, activity for its own sake. . . . Today, however, we seldom associate freedom with play. Freedom is grim, something to be fought for . . . instead of generating effusiveness, spontaneity and joy.

—Walter J. Ong

My great-aunt Cecile is a ninety-two-year-old physician, a strong, gray-haired little lady who still, at her age, practices family medicine in New York City. She objects to my game theory of life. She said to me:

"It is very sad that we must take our lives so seriously, but what can we do? Existence, after all, is very hard. Every day is a new fight. The game theory empties our struggles of any real meaning; it turns our suffering into a pathetic experience."

I believe the contrary. I believe that the game theory gives our struggles a new meaning and fills them with fun. Echoing the Buddha, my great-aunt Cecile recognizes the fact that suffering is inevitable. It saddens her, but she finds no solution for it:

"I fear," she added, "that people will misinterpret your message. They will think that everything is a 'big joke' to you."

"You've told me that the world is so beautiful. It's true," I replied. "You tell me that the world is a magnificent adventure. You tell me that this world is a unique creation, perhaps one of a kind. But, you tell me, it cannot be a happy place?"

The idea that the world is not, perhaps cannot be, a happy place, is a hard one for me to swallow, in spite of the harsh facts

of reality: "Life must be lived as play,"⁹ Plato told his pupils. I cannot help thinking that Plato made a point worth exploring.

Many things in life *are* consequential, and must be taken seriously—such as holding a job, raising a family, and looking after our parents. On the other hand, when we ascribe so much import, weightiness, and anguish to our activities, even our sports games, we end up taking little joy in them.

Awhile back, I made the decision that since I play all the time anyway—we all do while forgetting that we do—I might as well enjoy it. The hitch was to stop taking my self so damn seriously, and to catch myself every time I do. When I finally stopped taking myself seriously, I became alive. And that's what this book is about, *lightening up*.

Although I do not believe that I, or anyone, can effectively instruct another "how to become alive," since it largely depends on one's psychological background, I do believe that the right attitude is a big part of it. Therefore, the idea is to inspire readers to want to lighten up, and to develop and nurture a playful attitude toward existence in general in the form that best suits one's personality and psychological makeup. It is one of those things whose consequences one does not realize until one does it.

What vitamins and minerals do for a healthy body, viewing life as a game does for a happy, sound, and productive mind. It is no wonder that play is used in therapy. Participating in life's games consciously and deliberately might yet become the mark of Western civilization.

Anne Lamott is a wonderful writer, and, I am told, a good instructor and one funny woman. In *bird by bird* she writes: "We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are. Sheep lice do not seem to share this longing, which is one reason they write so very little."¹⁰ Writing this book was my effort to comprehend ourselves, what we do, and why we do what we do. This work is about human life in society—what social order is, and what it does to us as individuals.

A growing number of psychiatrists and therapists now acknowledge the fact that much of our nervousness and despair is caused by the failure to reconcile life's meaninglessness. We are poorly equipped to consciously deal with the lack of any real purpose, the futility of our existence, hardships, and trials. Consequently,

we give meaning to our existence through the roles we play in society, through the games we dramatize in our communities and religious institutions, and through the theologies and philosophies that we create. We take life seriously to give it a meaning, and to feel validated and safe. But in this process we deprive ourselves of the joy that “playing life” awards.

In *The Last Vampire*, Sherlock Holmes keenly reminds us that it is one thing to diagnose a problem, another to resolve it. With his brier tobacco pipe, the observant eyes of a scientist, and the mind of a philosopher, Holmes is many people’s favorite detective. What does Holmes have to do with this book? Everything. To Holmes, life was a game.

The famed American educator Abraham Joshua Heschel voiced the concern that the modern person is losing the power of celebration. We seek to be amused instead of celebrating life, he said. Being entertained, to receive pleasure from an act or a spectacle initiated by others, is a passive state. Our lives do not get celebrated this way.

Years ago, I copied into my diary the following verse. Unfortunately I didn’t write down its source. I wish I could take credit for these eloquent words, but I can’t, and even though I am unable to acknowledge their well-deserving author, I would like to share them with you:

Masters in the art of living draw no sharp distinction
between their work and their play, their labor and
their leisure,
their mind and their body, education and recreation.
They simply pursue their vision through whatever
they are doing,
leaving to others to determine whether they are
working or playing.
To themselves, they always seem to be doing both.

Childhood Memories

My mother and father are Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Their traumatic experiences left them with a suspicious view of humanity, and a perpetual fear of life.

In my youth I harbored an aspiration to become a playwright and an actor. I did both successfully through my junior high school years. I enrolled in a professional acting school, wrote the plays for my classes, and performed leading roles. I enjoyed acting, and rendered it well. A couple of plays produced by the drama school took me on a tour around the country. I began to talk about a career in the field. My parents, however, objected vehemently:

“Actors and writers are starving artists. To be successful in this world, you must be ready for the worst. Remember that you will be alone when troubles come, and they will.”

My family always lived in expectation of adversity. To us this was the real world.

Children like to fantasize about virtual realities, because in them we can be anything we want to be. Since we did not have school buses, I walked over a mile each morning to school, and again back home every afternoon. It gave me the opportunity to day-dream without being scolded that I was wasting time in an unproductive activity. I could fantasize about being a famous author or a star on Broadway. But I grew up to be a pragmatic survivalist.

After returning in one piece from the Six-Days-War, I had to relinquish my artistic ambitions and enrolled in a school of economics. I became a corporate executive, launching an insensitive, rather ruthless business career. As an adult, I forget how to be playful. I ignored the value of play, growing oblivious to the healing qualities of playfulness. Corporate greed became the name of the game, but I saw it as *survival*. I found myself extremely serious, a highly driven overachiever, and bereft.

I think that many of us take too many things too seriously, because of our desperate effort to make everything count, to make all things meaningful. And yet, we are inspired by Superwoman, James Bond, Zorro, Robin Hood, even Lex Luther. Garb and costumes are important to us. Military and police uniforms, doctor and nurses' uniforms, guards' uniforms, school uniforms, sports uniforms, and business suits and briefcases—all are costumes. Flags, ribbons, medals, and passports are accessories in the games we play with each other. They both define and remind us of the roles we enact. They guide our actions, conduct, and worldviews.

Now I am often aware of an underlying sense of unreality when I am doing something *serious* or *important*, or when I interact with

individuals who take so seriously whatever it is they happen to be doing, as if the unforeseen destiny of the world, or of our lives, really depended on it.

I will leave you, for now, with the words of the acclaimed Dutch anthropologist, Johan Huizinga. I find his keen historical and philosophical insight beaming the spotlight on my work's theme:

Our species has been named *Homo Sapiens*—"Man the Rational." Since then, we have come to realize that we are not as reasonable as the naive eighteenth-century philosophers thought. Therefore, in the modern age, the fashion is to refer to ourselves as *Homo Faber*—"Man the Maker." There is a third function—just as important as "reasoning" and "making"—and that is "playing." Next to *Homo Faber*, and perhaps on the same level as *Homo Sapiens*, "Man the Player"—*Homo Ludens*—deserves a place in our list of names.¹¹