**Playing By Heart**

**by J. insui Giehl with Julie Johnson**

Twelve kids sit in a circle on the floor, their rapt attention focused on the big bear of a man who’s come to play with them. O. Fred Donaldson introduces himself and speaks briefly about his experiences playing with children and wild animals over the past 27 years. "Have you ever played with a lion?" one boy asks. "Yes," Fred replies, and tells about how in the middle of play a lioness once had his whole head in her jaws. "I think she was testing me, and some instinct told me to just relax my whole body completely. As soon as I did, she set me down — very gently." Twelve mouths gape open. "Now I hope you won’t try playing with lions," he says, "but I would like to play with each of you."

Fred crawls on his hands and knees into the center of the circle, and with an expression reminiscent of a cocker spaniel’s, he fixes an inquisitive gaze on one girl. She accepts his wordless invitation and joins him in the center. She touches his hand, then his arm, and pretty soon they are rolling about together. After a while he claps his hands and she rejoins the circle, and one by one the other kids come in to play with Fred. Sometimes the play is raucous and wild, the child pouncing on Fred and him receiving; other times the play is gentle and sweet, almost meditative.

What Fred Donaldson does is play. Not the win-lose "contest" behavior our culture thinks of as play, but a kind of physical, rolling-around-on-the-floor, connecting-heart-to-heart play that he learned from countless interactions playing with kids and wild animals of all descriptions. He considers this form of non-competitive play, which he calls "original play," to be the universal energy that connects all living beings, and he's devoting his life to reminding people of this fact that our culture has helped us to forget.

Ranging from vigorous to tender, Fred's play is based on connecting with each individual exactly where he or she is, whether the player is an eighty-year-old, a two-year-old, a wolf, or a dolphin, and blending with the energy they bring in without engaging in a win-lose "contest." He shows how we can transform aggression physically by staying present, receiving the energy, and responding with an open heart.

Shortly after he started teaching at universities in the United States and Canada, he came upon the topic of play. He had no idea what he was getting into. For him, as for most people, "play" was games: football, chess, all the games he grew up with. But then he had the opportunity to be on the ground (literally) with kids two to four years old, six hours a day, with no program, no agenda, no intention of teaching them anything. The kids began to teach him because he was open to learning from them.

He kept notes about the patterns he had observed. He kept playing because he knew that something important was happening to him. Eventually, he began to see that play has no competition: no interpersonal competition and not even competition within oneself. It's not an ethical or practical decision. Competition is simply irrelevant to play.

Fred relates, "Another lesson I was being taught had to do with patterns of touch. There was a circular pattern of touch that began with the feet and hands and moved in and up the body. The motion with which the children touched, the body motion that they used, was all circular. There was never any facing off or squaring up shoulder to shoulder. This pattern never changed."

During the time he was being taught these lessons, he was a consultant at a school, playing with normal kids, and also with autistic and schizophrenic children and children from other countries. He found that*all* these children played in the same way, without being given any instructions about how to play.

His curiosity aroused, he then read about play in psychiatry, psychology, sociology, social work, and education publications, but what he found did not describe his playing experience on the ground. The play he read about had to do with contests and games. He found that adults think of play as a way of making children into adults — of introducing children to our cultural patterns because we adults think it's useful, especially to sublimate aggression.

He realized that almost everything that had been written about play had been written by people who merely observed it. Nobody played; everybody watched. After years of learning through playing, Fred says, "Original play gives us the ability to quickly communicate kindness, trust, love, and compassion to any being on Earth. This is the natural play that all species know at birth. It usually begins with eye contact, gradually becoming physical as trust is established. Wild animals and young children first touch with fingertips, then incorporate the whole body as playmates run alongside one another and spin, climb, and cuddle."

When Fred is asked how he thinks about original play, he says, "Life is at once full of terror and wonder, fear and trust. It’s our ability to play in the presence of this mystery that allows us to create, and in turn, to be created. This is the play of our origins, when we didn’t inquire about meaning, we felt meaning directly. We began life as God’s playmate sent into a great wilderness to discover meaning and purpose by connecting and belonging to the mystery of all things. Authentic play is our original contract with life. It is the keeper of life’s wider, grander plan where kinship and community are determined by the deepest and abiding considerations of life."

Fred also plays with cancer patients, special-needs children, gang members, and CEOs, and demonstrates that original play requires courage, not just in the face of death, but in daily life. Such play accomplishes two tasks: In today's culture of separateness, it tells us we belong; it's a new vision of belonging. Also, original play is a tangible, practical, and accessible practice.

According to Fred's thinking, play’s vision and practice of belonging teach strategic skills and enable the development of new habits that are important anywhere. He enumerates them as:

"1) The courage to practice unconditional kindness, a kindness that demands a mental and physical toughness beyond our notions of strong and weak.

2) To engage that part of life in each of us that looks, feels, and touches more deeply than the categories within which most of us live our lives.

3) Experiencing a sense of compassion that expresses no sides, no enemies, no blame, no fault, no revenge, no self-defense.

4) Cultivating a stillness within which exists unlimited possibilities for action.

5) Developing and expanding our capacity to love, thereby replacing love’s play for self-centered fear as our response to every challenge."

Play helps us recover the lost traits of childhood: play, spontaneity, trust, wonder, joy, belonging, and simplicity, not as abstract ideas, but as tangible expressions of our innate humanity which are just beneath the surface of our adult seriousness.

*O. Fred Donaldson, Ph.D., will give an Introduction to Original Play April 27, 7:30-9:00 p.m. ($10) and a Playshop April 28, 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. ($75) at Keystone Church, 5019 Keystone Pl., Seattle. April 29, Fred will play with specific groups of children. For information, call insui at (206) 533-6373 or Julie at (206) 706-6783. Sponsored by Edmonds Healing Arts Center.*

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