

PLAYFUL EDUCATION IN A PLAYFUL UNIVERSE

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The testimony of a college student in our Honours course, ‘Awakening to Cosmic Compassion’, gives an idea of the impact that movement and embodied meditation can make on learning.¹

The ‘Poem of the Atoms’ by Rumi sent me into a state of ecstatic joy. I felt like dancing to celebrate my connection with the universe. During the meditation I could feel vibrations in my hands and my arms. I could imagine the earth rotating as we lay prostrate. When I rolled over on my back I could take in every feeling. Then I imagined the Sacred Mystery coming above me like a cloud riding on the wind... I felt the connection to the universe deep inside my bones... During the ACC course, I danced with freedom, with openness and vulnerability... I think the dancing was a kind of healing, like a final release. I have just never danced this way before! To let go of every inhibition, every fear, to

1 This was one of the ACC Honours courses co-facilitated in September 2016 by the team of the Department of Interreligious Studies (DIRS), St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai consisting of Orla O’Reilly Hazra, PhD, Candice Menezes, MASW, MPhil, and Prashant Olalekar, SJ, PhD. Besides the usual academic courses there are special Honours courses in which there is scope for innovation with exposures, creative assignments etc. A credit is given for 15 hours of work.

reveal myself finally, to breathe as the real me, to move as the real me – What a blessing!²

Need for a Revolution in Education

Sir Ken Robinson, in his Ted Talk, ‘Do Schools Kill Creativity?’, makes a provocative observation: ‘There isn’t an education system on the planet that teaches dance every day to children the way we teach them mathematics’!³

Most education focuses on academic topics that strengthen the dominant left brain with subjects and skills that are job-oriented. This is a worldwide pattern. The arts (dance, drama, music and painting) are given secondary importance and are usually included as optional, extra-curricular activities. The major concern of most students today is to get good results in their exams, which serve as a passport to a job that will give them money, status and power in society.

Despite all efforts at reform, we still find ourselves trapped in an antiquated education system that is preoccupied with amassing information, rather than stimulating discovery and triggering transformation. How long do we continue with making just small adjustments to a system that we have inherited from the time of the Industrial Revolution? These reforms only succeed in effecting some cosmetic changes to a system that is deeply entrenched ‘in the box’. The rapid pace of change in the 21st century calls for thinking outside of the box. Something more radical is demanded and nothing short of a revolution will suffice.

Playful Universe

What can we learn from observation of the universe, which is our primary educator, according to the late Thomas Berry, the renowned cosmologist and geologist. Dance is inbuilt in the universe. Who is not fascinated by the dance of dolphins and peacocks, the birds and the butterflies, the fish and the snakes? The blooming and blossoming of flowers display a unique dance of their own. We nonchalantly speak of dancing waves and leaves dancing in the wind. In many Indian

2 Riya Sawant, *What a Blessing*, Assignment, ACC Honours Course 2016, St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai.

3 Ken Robinson, ‘Do Schools Kill Creativity?’, *TED Talk*, February 2006, <https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity>, accessed 24 May 2017.

communities, as in tribal cultures, there is a dance for every important occasion like birth, death, and weddings. Religious and cultural festivals are often linked with the rhythms of nature. The whole of creation is connected with this fascinating dance. Dance reminds us that we are part of a playful universe that is constantly in motion.

Play, which includes dance, is all-pervasive in nature. Steve Keil, an advocate for transformative play, states: ‘Evolution has selected, over millions and billions of years, for play in animals and in humans’.⁴ Ants and elephants play; so do rats and cats, dogs and bears. Play is innate in children. We are hardwired to play from childhood to old age. Stuart Brown, a noted researcher on play, claims that humans are ‘the most youthful, the most flexible, the most plastic of all creatures’.⁵ From the atoms in our bodies to the stars in the galaxies everything is in constant motion, everything is involved in a cosmic dance.

Does it not seem quite crazy that in a playful universe that is vibrant with motion, for most of the time students are stuck immobile behind desks passively listening to teachers transmitting information? The teachers have a hard time to keep up the flagging interest of passive students. There is hardly any play, dance or movement in the normal classroom, with not much scope to discover and innovate. Students have a lot of fun when they feed their hunger for the arts in the various cultural programmes that nurture the right brain. There is much informal learning too that takes place in extracurricular activities and exposure visits.

God at Play

The extent to which God and dance have been divorced from each other can be gauged by the comment of atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who declared: ‘I would believe only in a God that knows how to dance’.⁶ In the Indian tradition, the creation myths depict God

4 Steve Keil, *A Play Manifesto: Steve Keil at TEDxBG*, on *YouTube*, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SZFY47aIog>, accessed 25 April 2017.

5 Stuart Brown, ‘Play is More than Fun’, *TED Talk*, on *YouTube*, 12 March 2009, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHwXlcHcTHc>, accessed 28 April 2017.

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Quotes’, <<https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1938>>, accessed 20 April 2017.

in motion. Shiva or Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer, who is considered to be the source of all movement in the universe, revels in the ecstatic dance of creation, preservation, and dissolution.⁷ We also have the multifaceted Krishna, as the uninhibited child, the playful prankster, the elegant dancer, and the captivating flute-player for whom life is *leela* (divine play) in the universe – the playground of life.⁸ This is a compelling reminder that life is playful and joyful. The Sufi poet Hafiz has an enchanting poem, ‘God Knows Only Four Words’, which concludes with the startling invitation: ‘Come dance with me’.⁹ Fritjof Capra, the celebrated quantum physicist, shows that modern physics and traditional Eastern mysticism concur on the reality of cosmic dance.

Modern physics has shown us that movement and rhythm are essential properties of matter; that all matter, whether here on earth or in outer space, is involved in a continual cosmic dance. The Eastern mystics have a dynamic view of the universe similar to that of modern physics, and consequently it is not surprising that they too, have used the image of the dance to convey their intuition of nature.¹⁰

7 For a popular presentation of this imagery, see ‘The Meaning of Shiva’s Cosmic Dance (Nataraja)’ at <<http://experiencehinduism.com/interesting-stories/nataraja-shiva-cosmic-dance-meaning>>, accessed 16 May 2017.

8 Sadhguru, ‘The Essence of Leela: Devotion and Playfulness’, <<http://isha.sadhguru.org/blog/yogameditation/history-of-yoga/essence-of-leela-devotion-and-playfulness/>>, accessed 17 April 2017.

9 Hafiz, ‘God Knows Only Four Words’, *Goodreads* at <<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/974210-every-child-has-known-god-not-the-god-of-names>>, accessed 10 May 2017.

10 Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, New York: Bantam Books, 1984, pp. 228–229.



Image 1: Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer, source of movement in the universe. Bronze statue, Tamil Nadu, India, 11th century CE, Guimet Museum, Paris, France. Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AShiva_Nataraja_Mus%C3%A9_Guimet_25971.jpg>.

Many are not aware that, in Christianity, the Greek term, perichoresis (peri meaning ‘around’ and chorea meaning ‘dance’), has been used to symbolize the intimate dance of the Trinity, into which human beings are invited to join.¹¹ Church tradition has been so caught up with heady philosophical speculation that this embodied trinitarian image used by the early Church Fathers has not been popularized. Jesus, who is usually presented as a serious person, uses the playful pedagogy of the parables to educate his disciples. The fact that children were attracted to him is a concrete sign of his warm and spontaneous personality. In the post-Resurrection narratives, one notices Jesus mischievously playing hide-and-seek with Mary Magdalene and his disciples, who fail to recognize him.

The 13th century Rhineland mystic, Meister Eckhart, who was censured for his radical ideas, once preached a sermon with an unusual

¹¹ John English, ‘Dialoguing With The Dance of Creation’, *The Way*, vol. 43, no. 1, January 2004, p. 20. For a more popular discussion of perichoresis, see Curtis Thompson, ‘Perichoresis: The Dance of God’ at <<http://churchintoronto.blogspot.in/2012/05/perichoresis-dance-of-god.html#!/2012/05/perichoresis-dance-of-god.html>>, accessed 24 May 2017.

title, ‘God Laughs and Plays’. He shared this rare insight of a humorous God: ‘My Lord told me a joke. And seeing Him laugh has done more for me than any scripture I will ever read’.¹² After reading this quote, I googled ‘God and laughter’ but was shocked to find a YouTube video of demonic laughter. On reflection, I was puzzled why laughter is associated with demons and why images of a laughing God are hard to find.



Image 2: Students at Asha Daan, a home run by Mother Teresa’s nuns in Byculla, Mumbai, India, 2 October 2016. Photograph by Fr. Cleo Braganza SDB.

That evening, I took a group of students from St. Xavier’s College, as part of their Honours course on the ‘Joy of Self Discovery’, to Asha Daan, a home run by Mother Teresa’s nuns for the physically and mentally challenged destitute. While preparing the students for the interactive meditation, a horribly deformed child, whose gender was difficult to ascertain, came into the centre of the group and began wishing each one of us well, with delightful, unabashed laughter. Like a bolt of lightning, an insight – almost mystical – hit me: This is the laughter of God, a God who is beyond gender, a God whose face shines resplendent in vulnerable brokenness.

¹² Cited and discussed in Prashant Olalekar, ‘Exploring Play: “Out of the Box” Theologising’, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, vol. 80, October 2016, pp. 774–800.

This experience prepared me to grasp the novelty and depth of another saying from Meister Eckhart: ‘Do you want to know what goes on in the heart of the Trinity? I will tell you. In the heart of the Trinity the Father laughs and gives birth to the Son. The Son laughs back at the Father and gives birth to the Spirit. The whole Trinity laughs and gives birth to us’.¹³

Benefits of Play

Lack of play leads to ill-health and a host of diseases. Experiments have shown that depriving rats and kittens of play leaves them handicapped with regard to social skills. Studies have shown that deprivation of play in humans can lead to violence and even murder.¹⁴ Our personal experience confirms the benefits that research shows about play.

Play stimulates joy and is a great antidote to depression and other diseases. It is a great stress-buster. Play not only keeps us physically fit but also lights up the brain. Neural growth in the amygdala, the area which is linked with emotions, is activated. The pre-frontal cortex, which controls cognition, is also stimulated. Play enhances emotional maturity and decision-making ability.¹⁵ It helps to develop cooperation, collaboration, creativity and other useful skills for teamwork. It cultivates empathy that can offset narcissism. It encourages risk-taking and develops confidence, so we can solve problems; it enkindles the imagination to think out of the box and fosters adaptability.

These are precisely the skills needed for life, as well as for jobs in whatever field one chooses. As noted by psychologist Peter Gray: ‘From a biological evolutionary perspective, play is nature’s means of ensuring that young mammals, including young human beings, acquire the skills that they need to acquire to develop successfully into adulthood’.¹⁶ Hence it looks obvious that play should play a great role in any education system.

13 Ibid.

14 Stuart Brown, with Christopher Vaughan, *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, New York: Penguin Books, 2009, p. 5.

15 Steve Keil op cit.

16 Peter Grey, ‘The Decline of Play’, *TEDxNavesink*, on *YouTube*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg-GEzM7iTk>>, accessed 15 May 2017.

Play is Fun but not Frivolous

There is a common tendency to discard play as pointless. Play is surely fun, but not frivolous. Those who do not consider play serious enough would do well to heed the advice of the prophetic mystic Thomas Merton to his colleague Jacques Maritain:

... and do what you do more as play than as work, which does not mean that it is not serious: for the most serious thing in the life of a Christian is play... . All life is in reality the playing and dancing of the Child-God in His world, and we, alas have not seen it and known it.¹⁷

In a similar vein, Indian Jesuit spiritual-guide Anthony de Mello shares an interesting eastern wisdom story:

The Master once referred to the Hindu notion that all creation is ‘leela’ – God’s play – and the universe is his playground. The aim of spirituality, he claimed, is to make all life play.

This seemed too frivolous for a puritanical visitor.
‘Is there no room then for work?’
‘Of course there is. But work becomes spiritual only when it is transformed into play’.¹⁸

For those who consider work and play as opposites, psychiatrist Stuart Brown offers sound advice on integrating play into our daily lives.

So I would encourage you all to engage not in the work-play differential – where you set aside time to play – but where your life becomes infused minute by minute, hour by hour, with body, object, social, fantasy, transformational kinds of play. And I think you’ll have a better and more empowered life.¹⁹

17 Thomas Merton, *Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, New York: Harvest Books, 1993, p. 38.

18 Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Nonsense*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1992, p. 96.

19 Stuart Brown op. cit.; idem, ‘Play is More than Just Fun’, Ted Talk, May 2008, <https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital?language=en>.

Type of Play

It is good to note that play includes a wide range of right brain activities like dance, music, visual arts, humour, and meditation. What we refer to here is not competitive play, focused on victory or loss and resulting in stress; nor play that has been highly commercialised. Our kind of play is best exemplified by a practice called InterPlay, which integrates body, mind, heart, and spirit.²⁰ It facilitates improvised movement, song, story, shape and stillness, based on the wisdom of the body.

Inspired by InterPlay I have devised Cosmic Meditation, a judicious blend of selected Eastern and Western forms of meditative practice that awakens us to our inter-connectedness. Meditation usually brings up images of stillness. Most participants come with the expectation that they will have to sit cross-legged and motionless, and concentrate on their breath. They are pleasantly surprised to be led into ordinary daily movements like walking, running and improvising. They have the opportunity to flit like a butterfly, fly like a bird, swim like a fish, and stand like a tree. Through imagination and simple playful movements, they are put in touch with nature.



Image 3: Cosmic Meditation at Fireflies Ashram in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, 2016. Prashant Olalekar, the developer of Cosmic

²⁰ Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter are philosophers, speakers, authors and teachers who began developing the InterPlay practice and philosophy in 1989 and have been sharing it around the world. *InterPlay: Unlock the Wisdom of your Body*, <<http://www.interplay.org/index.cfm/go/about:cynthia-winton-henry-and-phil-porter/>>, accessed 24 May 2017.

Meditation, is centre left in the dark kurta (see the article about Fireflies Ashram in our journal). Photograph by Shabin Paul.

The participants are gradually made aware of their inner universe and its intimate connection with the outer universe. After spontaneous movement, they have the opportunity to enter the depths of stillness and experience deep relaxation. They are then invited to give expression to the fruit of their meditation in free art. This process of mindful awareness, together with various other inputs, leads to a transformation of consciousness. They are guided to trust the wisdom of the body: personal, communitarian, and cosmic.

Cosmic Meditation has become a highly useful tool for embodiment at the ‘Awakening to Cosmic Compassion’ (ACC) Honours course, co-facilitated by the Department of Inter-Religious Studies team. Together with the Cosmic Walk, it provides an opportunity to embody and integrate the learnings from the universe story, which traces the evolutionary journey of the universe from the Big Bang about 13.8 billion years ago to our present times.

I also use Cosmic Meditation for other Honours courses, like ‘Joy of Self Discovery’, coupled with sessions of playful meditation with the poor in places like Asha Daan. In other forms of service to or interaction with the poor, there is always an inherent gap between the giver and recipient. The playful meditation serves to bridge the gap and is mutually enhancing and liberating for both parties. There is a rare taste of equality, however fleeting it may be. The students, who went with an attitude of serving the poor, were amazed to receive abundant blessings of simple joy and unconditional trust that were showered upon them. During the reflection, they raised issues of how education can motivate them to become voices for the voiceless in a consumerist, competitive world.

In 2015, as part of the Special Course on Environment for first-year Bachelor of Arts students, we presented the film, *Journey of the Universe*, which narrates the process of cosmic evolution and discusses the complexity, connectivity and creativity permeating the universe.²¹

21 In the film and book *Journey of the Universe* evolutionary philosopher Brian Swimme and historian Mary Evelyn Tucker weave a tapestry that draws together scientific discoveries in astronomy, geology, and biology with humanistic insights concerning the nature of the universe. Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn

After a brief meditation to help the students integrate the message in the film, they seemed quite overwhelmed. We offered the insight that we have the same atoms as the stars in our bodies, which provided a personal connection with the universe.²² Unlike the Honours courses, the complex message of the video was not as successfully integrated into the student outcomes, because supporting exercises like the Cosmic Meditation or the Cosmic Walk could not be held (due to the fact that there were more than 100 students, there was a lack of space for movement, time constraints and an unfavourable classroom setup).

Challenge: Can we Design a Playful Education for a Playful Universe

The only thing that is predictable about the future is that it is unpredictable. If the purpose of education is to prepare students for the future, then how do we educate them so that they can make their contribution to a rapidly changing universe? Two qualities that they will undoubtedly need in large measure are creativity and flexibility, which are the major plus points of play.

Due to science and technology in a globalised world, our horizons are being considerably widened, and we are becoming conscious that we are part of a global village. However, we often draw up development plans and policies as though the planet and the wider universe do not exist. Alarming signals of global warming are compelling us to take ecological factors like pollution, climate change and ecocide into account.

Eco-theologian Matthew Fox reminds us of the original purpose of education: ‘University originally meant a place where one went to experience his or her place *in the universe* – thus, to find wisdom’.²³ Thomas Berry also offered a new perspective on education by situating

Tucker, *Journey of the Universe*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011; idem, *Journey of the Universe: An Epic Story of Cosmic, Earth, and Human Transformation*, dirs. David Kennard and Patsy Northcutt, Northcutt Productions, 2011.

22 It is gratifying to note that, just before a serious operation, I remembered a quote on our office notice board: ‘The stars were compassionate enough to explode and die so that we could become stars’. My efforts to communicate this insight to the students had a transformative impact on me and gave me the peace and equanimity to be ready for any eventuality, even death.

23 Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance*, San Francisco: Harper, 1988, p. 22.

it in the overall context of the universe. It is truly out-of-the-box since the universe cannot be contained in a box, however large the box might be!

The American college may be considered a continuation, at the human level, of the self-education processes of the earth itself: universe education, earth education, and human education are stages of development in a single education process. We cannot adequately discuss any stage of the development without seeing it within this comprehensive context.

By universe education I do not mean universal education or university education, but the education which identifies with the emergent universe in its variety of manifestations from the beginning until now. So, too, by earthy education I do not mean education about the earth, but the earth as the immediate self-educating community of those living and nonliving beings that constitute the earth. I might also go further and designate earth as the primary educational establishment, or the primary college, with a record of extraordinary success over some billions of years.²⁴

To spell out the implications of the paradigm shift involved in regarding the universe or the Earth as the core reference point of education will require a separate paper. It is important to take note that, while it is vital to consider the local and global context in the educational process, so too the comprehensive context of the universe and Earth is absolutely essential.

Why is play, which has such a tremendous potential for learning, been so divorced from education, with play exiled to the playground and education restricted to the classroom? This paper is my earnest plea for a complementary arts-based approach to education, in order to balance the one-sided emphasis on the right brain. Play will have a key role in this new system. This will require a step-by-step process in a strategy for structural transformation. It will involve a host of changes in curriculum, teaching pedagogies, appropriate venues for classes,

²⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990, pp. 89–90.

frequent exposures to listen to the cry of the poor and Mother Earth. It will be well worth it, for the rewards will be immense in the field of education and for the challenging future for which the students are being prepared.

Play can revolutionise education and make it come alive with much more fun. Study, work and life can become much less stressful and much more enjoyable. Integrating it into the educational system will be a great challenge. Opportunities will have to be provided so that students can learn how to integrate study and play as a foretaste of integrating work and play later. We are being trained for work, can we be trained for playful work?

Satish Kumar, in a lively TED Talk, makes a plea for a holistic approach to education that involves not just heads but hearts and hands too.²⁵ We believe that education is about catering to the integral growth of the whole human person to play a transformative role not only in a globalised world but an evolving universe. One of the best ways to do this is to learn the art of play from the universe and to use it effectively in the pedagogical process. For those who are hesitant to launch this revolution as part of a giant leap into the future, Rumi's words of wisdom will provide the desired impetus: 'Stop acting so small. You are the universe in ecstatic motion'.²⁶

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25 Satish Kumar, 'Education with Hands, Hearts and Heads', *TEDxWhitechapel*, 12 January 2013, on *YouTube*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAz0bOtfVfE>>, accessed 14 May 2017.

26 Rumi, on *Goodreads*, <<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/579187-stop-acting-so-small-you-are-the-universe-in-ecstatic>>, accessed 10 May 2017.