

My Personal Journey Towards
Rediscovering Creative **Play** as an Adult

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Introduction

When I reminisce about my childhood, I remember what I loved to do: sing, dance, act, write, and perform. I loved to rehearse on stage and become a new character, and then portray that character to an audience. I liked the types of friendships I made in this space, because it felt like we had a space to trust one another. We could follow the directions, and perform on stage to the best of our abilities; but the minute we left the stage, we played around and spent a lot of time with each other. I miss the sense of accomplishment that I felt when I had performed without any mistakes. Or when I performed in a sad scene and other people could feel my emotions from the stage. In particular, I remember this feeling after I performed as Maria in “The Sound of Music” my junior year of high school, and saw a crowd of audience members waiting for me outside the auditorium to tell me that when I cried on stage, they cried with me. This was also the first time that I had ever been asked for my autograph from little girls who believed in my performance and me.

Now I am in a place where the thought of even auditioning for a play or musical paralyzes me. Some of my friends now don't even know that I can sing, because I never sing in front of them. As an adult, I have gotten to a place where I am too scared of judgment to do what I want to do; when, ironically, I would have thought that as an adult I would finally be doing everything I wanted. In addition to the external factors (work, time commitments) that have led to my loss of creative play, I have also experienced internal factors (such as self-doubt, making false comparisons to others) that may have affected me even more seriously. By exploring the reasons why a person loses their connection with their creative play, and why I myself have lost the connection, I feel that this will help me to find the way to reconnect.

In the fall of 2008, I took my first course in the Critical and Creative Thinking program: Creative Thinking. Taking this course came at a crucial point in my life when I

had (almost) accepted that as an adult, I needed to focus on my career, my relationships, my education, and my health... and nothing else. In our transition from childhood to adulthood, we are urged to abandon activities that we enjoy to "settle down to business"; however, in the process of hindering our own creativity, we are actually sabotaging our self-actualization and decreasing our optimal productivity (McCormick & Plugge, 1997). The problem with my focus on my career was that I always felt like something was missing. In fact, I still do. The missing piece is that I have forgotten what it's like to play and actively devote myself to exploring my creativity in a way that is playful, joyful, and mandatory for my happiness. I am at a stage in my life where I feel like I have made some connection back to my playful self, but if I don't take the time to actively make a commitment to it now, I may lose it again. Brannen (2002) tells us that we need to make promises to ourselves to play, and that keeping these promises is a gift we give to ourselves. My focus on why adults lose their creativity, how they can get it back, and how I myself can find it again is more than a project to me; it is my inspiration.

What is Creative Play and What Are Our Perceptions of it?

When I first began this project, I had a hard time trying to label what I was trying to describe as my play. I felt that unless I could pinpoint exactly what my idea of creative play was, I couldn't move forward with a deeper understanding of my own goals. To help you understand more about my metacognitive evolution towards a definition of creative play for myself, I would like to let you in on my thought process. I wanted to call it "creative personal development or growth" at first, because to me, this phrase invoked images of my younger self being involved in acting, singing, and dancing lessons, that led to performances. I thought about this creativity as a way to develop myself, because in addition to it being a joyful experience for me, it also involved the refinement of skills. I refined my own definition to be called "creative acts of artistic expression," a term that I found in my research about creativity. This seemed to narrow my focus, as it was

specifically referring to artistic expression, and how I was defining my specific type of play. The "artistic expression" phrasing referred to my background in the arts and in creative performance. At this point, however, I stumbled upon two more theories that made me think that maybe I was becoming too focused. Although I was trying to justify my creative acts by making them seem more productive, I later discovered that this is not the point of play at all.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has developed a theory that he calls "flow," wherein creativity and play are looked at more as "optimal experiences" where people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it. He says that we need to learn how to enjoy everyday life without diminishing other people's chances to enjoy theirs. When we experience flow, our "self" becomes more complex as we allow ourselves more flexibility and more freedom for the sake of the action, and without any ulterior motives. I felt instantly that I was getting closer to what I was looking for: a reminder that these creative activities that I longed for were so important to me in my childhood that nothing else mattered.

Building upon the idea of "flow" is the term "heart play," which was coined by Brannen (2002). She describes "heart play" as being totally in the moment; being engaged in an activity that involves no unwelcome work, comes without responsibility, and creates an ecstasy that may not be apparent to anyone but you. "Heart play" is individualistic, can be productive or not productive, and is meant to invoke joy and the complete losing of one's sense of time. How will you know if you have found your heart play? You will experience feelings of total abandonment; no worries; joy; clear thinking; energy; curiosity; wonderment; pride; connection; movement; imagination; relaxation; and it will feel therapeutic. What I am missing is not the refinement of skills; what I am missing is my heart play.

After allowing myself to be open to the possibility of multiple definitions of creativity, I have finally settled on the term “play” or “creative play” to describe what I am longing for. And even with this definition, I am still thinking about the perceptions of creative play by others. Creative play is a risk because we often see it as leaving our comfort zones in order to do something that is different. There are varying perspectives on whether one should incorporate creative play into their adult lives. Some people may see it as negative because it *seems* like it is not a productive way to use one's time (they should be working, relaxing, spending time with friends and family, producing something). They may see it as negative because it *seems* unattainable as an adult and potentially selfish. Some people may see play as positive because it allows you to make time for yourself to do something that is ultimately enjoyable to you, and they can see that being selfish can be a good thing (why should we feel guilty about thinking about ourselves?).

I see play as both positive and negative: it is something that I want to achieve in and incorporate into my life, but at this point, it is adding to my to-do list and I am starting to worry that I might not be able to commit to it how I want to. To overcome this negative feeling towards play, I am looking at myself as a work-in-progress, or perhaps a “creative player-in progress.” I am looking at both the big and the small ways that I can begin to incorporate play into my life. First, I would like to explore why I feel as though I have lost my creative play in the first place.

What Factors Impact One’s Creative Play or Loss of Creative Play?

One of the factors that can lead to a loss of creativity as a person transitions from childhood to adulthood is the environment that they are in, in both stages of life. Many times, highly *scholastic* children come from households that are cohesive and child-centered, where the parents have strong bonds with their children. On the other hand, highly *creative* children tend to come from families where there are tense relationships,

dysfunction, or unconventional parenting. When children grow up in this second type of environment, they are sometimes inclined to have a stronger motivation to obtain *power*, which can result in creativity. Also, sometimes when families are low-income or have low socio-economic status, these parents often push their children to capitalize on early talents in sports or entertainment (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2000). The types of support and the general home environment of us as children plays a large role in whether we will continue to be highly creative as adults, based on the different motivational and situational factors that we faced in the past.

Emotions also affect our creativity level and our desire to pursue creative play or not. Negative emotions can hinder us in expressing our creativity, but they can also inspire us to use creative play as a way to handle that emotion or overcome that emotion. These negative emotions can create “powerful self-reflective thought and perseverance, leading to increased creativity” (Akinola & Mendes, 2008). Negative emotions can be feelings of sadness, depression, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, or self-judgment. In The Artist's Way, Cameron calls negative feedback that we give ourselves, “blurts.” She insists that we confront these blurts head-on to overpower their impact (1992). Another way that our negative emotions can manifest is by creating blocks or barriers to our creativity. Creative blocks can be seen as both the inability to finish existing projects and the inability to start new creative projects. Some of the emotional and attitudinal barriers could be fear of taking risks; fear of uncertainty and ambiguity; differences in values and needs; and personal characteristics that produce conflict (Davis, 1986).

Positive emotions can be happiness, hopefulness, feeling encouragement or support from others, or self-confidence. One way to actively change negative emotions, such as self-doubt, into positive emotions, such as confidence, is by using affirmations. These affirmations can be used in a meditation and spoken aloud to a group or alone, or

written in a journal. These affirmations are powerful messages that allow the audience to think through problems in a realistic way and realize that no one is alone in the emotions that they feel (Beattie, 1996). Positive emotions can allow you to have the self-confidence to take a risk that ends up helping you develop your creative play, whether or not the risk itself is successful.

In addition to the emotions that we feel about ourselves, there are also the emotions that we have in relation to those around us. Brannen (2002) says that some people have trouble getting back into their play because they're afraid that others will make fun of them. We are human and we make mistakes; but sometimes it's easier to criticize others that have taken a creative risk when we ourselves have not. People will judge us regardless of the decision that we make in relation to our play and how we express it. Because everyone's creative play is different, we can't expect everyone to agree or even find value in our creative play. It is ours, something that we alone hold onto, and if someone wants to criticize it, we have to learn to think that they're entitled to their opinion, even if it's different from our own.

As adults, we can always find rational excuses for why creative play isn't a part of our lives. In terms of exploring creative play, each generation has different qualities that make them unique from one another. Within each of these generations and their overall perceptions of creativity, there are also other factors, such as their age and their level of commitments that affect the way that they pursue their creativity. I would like to explore more research in how different age groups can re-activate and sustain their creative play, but unfortunately, the research currently available is either about children and creativity, creativity in the workplace (but not necessarily creative play), or older adults and creativity.

There is research now that shows that older adults benefit from programs that stimulate their creativity, because they are activating their creative thinking and finding

ways to incorporate it into their lives (Goff, 1992). While it is relevant to know that even if an adult loses their sense of creative play it is never too late to regain it, I am more interested in regaining this play while dealing with issues of careers, family life, and the transition from children to adults. Instead of one generation having it easier than the other generations to pursue creative play, maybe it is just that each generation pursues creative play in a different way. Younger adults feel that they need to stop playing to be taken more seriously; middle aged adults feel that they need to focus on their career and their family and that they don't have the time to play; and older adults feel like maybe it is too late for them to start playing again.

What Are Some of the Methods to Regain Creative Play as an Adult?

One suggestion to become motivated to regain creative play is to find a support group, or to create your own support system. A support system could even be found by looking back to the support systems of our childhood. In The Artist's Way, one of the activities of the first week involves thinking about your "monsters" (people that have criticized your creativity in the past) and your supporters (people that have encouraged your creativity in the past) (Cameron, 1992). Reconnecting with the supporters of your past creative play can be one way to regain a support system that worked for you in the past. In this activity, I immediately thought of my family, specifically my mom, my dad, and one of my grandmothers. In visualizing this support system, it helped me momentarily quiet my monsters. It made me realize that these people are all big supporters of all of my successes, both creatively and in my life in general.

Another way to get a support system is to find a buddy and establish creative play check-ins with them on a weekly basis. This can include finding someone to help you gain insight into your creative play (Hirst, 1992). Sometimes it is easier when others are expecting you to follow-through with something, because they will hold you accountable. When we hold ourselves accountable, we sometimes make excuses for

why we weren't successful. It is a lot easier to give up when no one knows that we are giving up but ourselves. If we doubt ourselves as to whether we can actually follow-through with pursuing creative play, we could potentially fail, ensuring the fulfillment of our own self-prophecy. We validate our reasons for not needing to even pursue creative play to begin with. A support system provides us with encouragement even when we are not yet at the point that we can fully support ourselves.

Brannen (2002) offers a different perspective on how to regain creative play as an adult. She first suggests that you look at a series of lists (either ones in her book or ones that you write yourself) to stimulate your thoughts for activities that you might enjoy as your play. Her method is to look at these lists, score them as to whether you would never do something in a million years, whether you would maybe do it, or whether it is something you have done before and know that you love. She then suggests that you look through your scoring system at the “maybes” and reflect more on why you considered them a maybe. Think about whether these maybes could turn into an activity that you really would like to try, even if it is just once. Often just going through these lists and being aware of the feelings that you have by thinking about the activities are enough to prompt you to action. The more activities you pursue, the closer you will become to finding what your “heart play” is and how you can continue to pursue it.

How Do I Plan to Incorporate Creative Play into My Life?

Although I am still in the process of regaining my own creative play, I feel like the first step to bringing more play into your life is awareness that you are not getting enough play to begin with, followed closely by determining how to implement a change in your lifestyle. How do we balance creative play with our other responsibilities? Can we successfully incorporate creative play into our lives without compromising our lives or our play? Sometimes having the want or need to pursue a goal is not enough; we need to cultivate "habits of mind" that allow us to successfully use creative play in our lives,

and learn to sustain that play as well. In cultivating a habit of mind, we need to have the inclination to pursue that habit in order for it to be successful. In addition, we also need to have the sensitivity to know when incorporating creative play into our lives is in fact appropriate and the commitment to allow play to be part of our thinking dispositions (Costa, 2001). It goes without saying, I think, that one would certainly have to value the importance of play in order to want it to be a habit of mind, and also have the capability to play in the first place. I personally think that we all have this capability, but the degree to which we value this play determines whether we have the inclination, sensitivity, and commitment to developing this play to fit in our lives.

I have begun following the 12-week program of The Artist's Way (Cameron, 1992), but I am already behind. I find that I am having trouble with one of what I perceived to be the simplest aspects of the program, which is keeping up with the "morning pages." Writing these pages means waking up half an hour early each day and freewriting for that entire time. The reason I am having trouble with it is not because I don't understand or don't like the concept. I am having trouble with the commitment level of purposely taking sleep time away in order to pursue my creative play. Through my morning pages, I have actually brainstormed that I would like to write before I go to bed instead of first thing in the morning. I am going to try to implement my own "night pages" during this process. Another excuse that I have come up with subconsciously for why I am not adapting well to this method is that because it is a program, it doesn't feel like play to me. However, some of the activities have been beneficial to me to explore why I have stopped being creative in the first place.

One step that I have taken already to incorporate creative play into my life is to become aware of my lack of creative play in the first place. I am also making myself accountable to pursue this loss of creative play by telling everyone (peers, co-workers, friends, family) that at this point in my life I am not feeling fulfilled in my creative play. I

have begun using The Artist's Way (Cameron, 1992) to get to the root of why I stopped playing and ways that I can start pursuing creativity again. After I feel that I have successfully accomplished this process, I plan to try some of the activities in another of Cameron's books, The Vein of Gold: A Journey to Your Creative Heart (1996). I find that I have focused too much on the negative emotions and the monsters in my life, and it is getting in the way of my actions. I have become paralyzed by my own self-sabotage. I have given too much credibility to people that have said negative things about my creativity (including myself), and not enough credibility to those that have praised me. Perhaps this relates to the Generation Y research that says that people in my age group have grown up in a world of positive tolerance, wherein children get rewarded by "just showing up" (Tulgan, 2009). I think that maybe this makes me think that if everyone is getting praised, then the praise doesn't have as much merit than if only a few people were receiving praise.

In addition to these ideas for myself to start incorporating play into my own life, I would like to tell you more about the types of play I would like to incorporate. I would like to sing in public again; I sometimes feel that my best singing happens when no one is around to hear me. By allowing myself to play with performance again, I will feel more confident in my abilities, and validated by receiving praise for this play. Another play I would like to pursue is to take dance lessons again. I have never really stopped taking dance lessons until recently; the last lessons I took were a couple years ago, and they were Samba dancing lessons. I know of several dance studios in the area that offer lessons that I know I would enjoy, but I need to take the leap (literally and figuratively) to attend these lessons and allow myself to enjoy them again. Another form of play that I would like to pursue is creative writing. One life goal that I have for myself, that I have trouble sharing with others because of the commitment and implications that it carries with it, is that I would like to write a fiction novel. I would like to write a novel from start to

finish without stopping to self-edit and tell myself that it isn't perfect. My goal in this play is to at least get the words out, to finish the novel, and to allow myself to consider the first draft as a true draft, that shouldn't by any means be perfect.

In my Critical Thinking course that I am taking simultaneously with this class, we have been talking a lot about transfer. How can we transfer critical thinking skills from the classroom to our lives outside of the classroom? By transferring a concept, we are showing that what we have learned is valuable to us. I would like to brainstorm ways that I can transfer the concept of creative play into my work and my career, because I have not yet been able to transfer these concepts naturally. A small way suggested by Brannen (2002) is to smile more in the workplace. She says that this act of smiling is really more for yourself than for the other person, because it will allow you to understand more about what you like and do not like about your work.

One way that I can actively transfer play into my current job is to laugh more when I receive negative feedback and to find the humor in having other people try to tell me what my job is (when they are making false assumptions). Just as it is with my creative play, sometimes I don't take the praise I receive as real, even if it is justified, and instead give more value to the negative feedback, even if that feedback is unjustified. By changing the way that I accept both positive and negative feedback, I can actively pursue more play in the workplace. The actual play that I would like to pursue involves taking the opportunities presented to me (such as designing the Retired Faculty Newsletter) and taking more of a risk. I am usually too safe when it comes to my writing, because my writing is often from another person's perspective (usually my boss or my office's), and sometimes this safety net carries over to all of my projects. However, there are some projects that I can afford to be more playful with, and this is something that I plan to work on.

How Can I Help Others to Incorporate Creative Play Into Their Lives?

One idea to help stimulate a sense of awareness of a loss of play in adults is to host a dialogue session about this topic. I think that in this dialogue session, by exploring the reasons we don't play and thinking about the ways in which we do play without realizing it, it could be very beneficial to myself and to the people involved. I feel like sometimes we don't want to admit that we are not doing as much as we can when it comes to doing what we love; doesn't it seem that we would naturally do what we love, and find the time for it? Since the concept of play and learning to play again as an adult is not as easy as it sounds, creating a safe environment for adults to talk and reflect about their own relationship with creative play could prove to be very therapeutic. We should suspend judgment of others and ourselves when it comes to our relationship with creative play, because we are all works in progress. A dialogue session might be what myself and others need to kick-start our own play and motivate each other.

In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Paley (1997) details her creative journey throughout her last year of being a kindergarten teacher; wherein she allowed her students, and one girl in particular, to lead the way in terms of lessons and playtime. Paley let go of the power of a traditional teaching role, and focused more on what she could learn from her students. By allowing herself to get enveloped in the notion of one author (Leo Lionni and his many children's books), she played alongside her students and found out that in their play, they were developing highly intellectual concepts and ideas of learning. In her play, she reconnected with her inner child and let go of the role of teacher in exchange for the role of fellow explorer. As a reader, we are allowed to take a peek at Paley's journey in discovering the way a child's sense of play can connect to adult learning and understanding. I would recommend that others read this book as well, to get a sense of how one person's risk-taking in their work-setting can lead to more learning and creative play than they could have imagined.

After my work-in-progress presentation to the class, I enjoyed reading the class responses because I felt that a lot of people found a way to make a connection between my project and their own lives. One common feeling described by my classmates was how my topic made them happy, joyful, and intrigued. What this shows me is that I was able to capture their attention enough to hopefully make them slightly more aware of the play in their own lives. In this feedback activity, I also received a lot of helpful ideas and new areas to explore. One great suggestion is that I develop a how-to manual on how to play. Perhaps this will be the next iteration of my project, after I first learn more about how I can play myself.

Although I am not a teacher in the traditional sense, I would like to be able to also lead by example in showing others how to reconnect with their play. Just as I felt inspired by reading Brannen's personal journey to play (2002), and Paley's explorations in her classroom (1997), I too would like to inspire others around me. I think the best way to do this would be through modeling and sharing my journey. Throughout the process of writing this paper, I have found that the people I have shared my topic with all seem to have their own reactions to play: happiness, nostalgia, or indifference. If I can show people that my feeling of nostalgia has turned into a feeling of happiness, then this can be a motivation for them to change their lives too. If I can connect with people that are seemingly indifferent to the concept of play and get them to think about why they have this reaction, then maybe I can help them find more awareness of their own play or whether they too have lost it. I have the power to not only pursue my own play, but to lead by example.

Conclusion

A journey of creative play is never completed. That's one of the best things about learning to play again: that it is a lifelong commitment. I believe that I am ready to make this commitment to myself and to allow the happiness that I receive by playing more spill

over into my professional and personal life. I am ready to confront my childhood creative play and to challenge it. Why do we spend time feeling nostalgic for a past that we think cannot be recreated, when there is still time to explore new ways to fulfill our creative play? In my journey, I have at least discovered why I don't play anymore. My biggest threat has not been that I am no longer capable of playing or being involved in creative play. My biggest threat is myself and my negative self-talk that has rendered me "playless". I am not allowing myself to experience creative play as a way to feel that sense of happiness and accomplishment because I am not fully letting go. For some reason, I have subconsciously determined that I don't deserve to play because I have too many other commitments at work or in class that consume my time. According to Brannen (2002), when it comes to finally breaking down our resistance to play, we will make many mistakes and have many false starts, but if we can push through, our lives will never be the same.

Creative play is personal because it touches the innermost part of our being. When we allow ourselves to play, we are allowing ourselves to be happy and be present in that moment. I believe that the role of creative play in our adult lives needs to increase, and we all need to come together to make creative play an accepted party of society. There will always be time to get everything done: we'll meet deadlines at work, we'll finish our papers and exams, and we'll be productive members of society and be able to take the time for those people closest to us. But we need to realize that there will always be time for creative play, too. We need to give ourselves the permission to play.

Much like the title of Brannen's book (2002), a book that reached me at a critical point in my research when I still felt quite lost, I have decided to give myself the "gift of play." My journey is still in progress, and I would like to take the next few months to really express my play and enrich my play. This paper serves as a way for me to reflect on the play and think metacognitively about my own play; but it has not yet allowed me

to explore my own play through actions. Although writing is a type of play for me, I would like to explore musical play as a reality. Part of what made a lasting impression with me in that first Critical and Creative Thinking course in the fall of 2008 was how I interpreted our final project. I used concepts in class (Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences) and applied them to a musical project with my father, in which he played guitar and we sang together. This was a project that I had wanted to do for so long, but couldn't find the time to do it until I made it a priority (and gave it a deadline). My commitment and involvement with this project gave me a glimpse of that heart play at a time when I wasn't ready to fully commit to it yet.

I will sing with my father again this summer. Perhaps at some point I will take the risk to sing one of the songs I have written (but cannot seem to show anyone). I am excited for my personal journey, because I feel like I have exhausted all the possible excuses and reasons for not playing. My biggest obstacle, myself, has turned into my biggest opportunity. By giving myself the time to think and reflect more on the reasons why adults don't play anymore, and why I myself don't play anymore, I have laid the groundwork for the next step in my journey: action. I have nothing to lose, because it seems that even if we "lose" our play, it can always be found again. I am one step closer to fully enriching my play and fully accepting my creativity as a part of me that cannot be stifled. In order for me to live the type of life I want to live, I must play. This is a promise to myself that I intend to keep.

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