

Fitness for Play

Summary of lectures in a series on "Mental hygiene as a problem of national fitness", given under the auspices of the National Council for Mental Hygiene, November 11th 1937

By Margaret Lowenfeld

The word "play" in the English language is curiously rich in its meaning. It is used for games, for the theatre—"let us now go and see a play"—for gambling, and for such expressions as "In the play of spears, Fell all the cavaliers".

When the adult uses the word "play" in his description of children or his thoughts about children, it is either with a tender and gentle meaning, or as an antithesis to work—"All work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy". When the Anglo-Saxon, however, uses it for himself, it becomes a matter of weight and seriousness. "Who after all is playing for Surrey this year?" is a sentence which in a cricket or football community would arouse the hottest and most serious discussion. When used by an artist, whether an artist in words or an artist in colour, "the play of light and shadow" becomes a matter of serious professional thought.

Language is the distilled spirit of a people's thought, and when apparent anomalies occur in the uses of important words, they can arise from two causes only: either the word in use has been derived from two different sources, each of which has undergone change, so that a form of letters originally conveying quite different ideas has come to be the same: or the inner, the unconscious, mind of the people is wiser than its conscious inheritance, and there are links of profound importance between the meanings commonly given to the same word, and this is the case with "play".

The fact that I have been asked to-night to lecture to you upon "Fitness for Play" is in itself an evidence of a growing recognition in the minds both of the specialists and of the general public of this fact. Play is supremely important, and the fact that you are here to-night shows that you agree with me, and with the designers of this course of lectures, that this is of importance for adults as well as for children.

Let us, therefore, go back for a moment and look very carefully at the meanings of this word.

Play—"I play golf"—"he plays cricket"—"you play tennis"—"Tommy is playing out in the garden"—"John Gielgud's playing of the part of Hamlet"

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In the recent production brought out new aspect of this character." Why do we use the same word for three so different activities? Tommy in the garden is, as the ordinary grown-up would say, "just playing about". You and I playing tennis or golf or cricket are carrying out a series of actions of a strictly ordered kind in a strict ordered set of circumstances in order to amuse ourselves. John Gielgud act— it is he who plays in presenteding his acted character to us. What is behind all this? And why should fitness for play be important element in the National Mental Health?

Let us look at this matter rather more closely; consider a hand holding a tennis racket or a ping-pong bat.

In order to be able to manipulate these instruments correctly seven things are necessary, and you come to think of it they are a lot of curious elements. It is necessary that the ratchet be held firmly, but in this firmness there must be no rigidity; it is necessary that the junction between the hand and the rest of the body should be free and supple; that the muscles of the various parts of the arm and shoulder behind the hand should work in harmony and be absolutely under the control of the will; that the whole body be prepared to subordinate its interests and its will to the purposes of the hand holding the ratchet. All this must be hold together in a unified scheme of thought, cheerfully and yet determinedly, and the individual brain behind the hand be fully in control of the whole of the process.

There is at present a widespread and, in some cases, acrimonious dispute in the athletic world on the question of amateur and professional status in regard to games played in public, and with the rights and wrongs of this dispute I am entirely unconcerned. I am, however, profoundly concerned with the conception that that lies behind the origin of this dispute, as it is a conception which touches the subject of our lecture very nearly. Originally, it is an attempt to do something of the same sort as the old adage attempts to do when it separates work and play in childhood. It is an attempt to preserve for the ordinary person the play atmosphere of games, and to prevent the deadly seriousness of other forms of athletics— boxing, running, jumping, etc.— from invading the sphere of play. The fact that the same controversy invades the athletic sphere is no concern of this argument, since any distinction once made in any field always tends automatically to

spread into neighbouring fields of activity, but that it does so does not in the last invalidate the original meeting.

We come back, therefore, to this basic controversy—play or work— amusement or a serious competitive activity. Let us consider further what it is necessary to do in order succeed in any of these games, and of what nature that success essentially is.

First of all, the question of whether one wins or does not win in such a game as golf or tennis has nothing whatever to do with the game. As soon as the game is played to win, and all pleasure and satisfaction goes out of a lost game, then the nature of the activity is changed. I do not want to consider whether it is worth doing or not with this changed aim, but only to draw your attention to the fact that it has become a different activity—it is no longer play, and so does not concern us here.

The essence of golf, tennis, cricket or football, or any other athletic game, which is played as a game is that it should be played for its own sake, for the sheer enjoyment that the thing itself brings to the person that plays it. Now this enjoyment is the crucial point of our study. It is this that we want to know something more about. What is this enjoyment, why should we have it, and why should it be important that we should see to it, for ourselves and our nation, that it forms a permanent part of the daily life of every one of us?

It is, I suggest to you, because the capacity to experience this type of enjoyment is an evidence of the most profound sanity in the individual and in the nation.

That is a very strong claim to make, and it needs careful justification. Let us see what is implied.

To go back to our previous consideration of the action of a person holding a tennis racket, what is necessary in order that this may come about? Firstly, that the whole person behind the tennis racket shall have achieved such a control of the self that certain parts of the body can be held contracted to their full power and simultaneously other parts be relaxed and flexible. You cannot play tennis in a rage, if you are frightened, if you are irritated, if you are stubborn or obstinate; you can only play successfully when yourself is poised within yourself, wearing its body loosely, as it were, and yet keenly and sensitively connected to it. There needs to be a consciousness both of the self, the object being hit, and of the individual muscles of the self, before anything effective can be achieved.

Let us take this further. Not only is this necessary, but you must also have fallen in sufficiently with current agreement on the subject to be willing to purchase a racket of the same shape as everybody else's, to stand in the place assigned to you by the rules of the

game, and carry out all your designs upon your opponent strictly within the rules permitted by the game.

Now in order that an individual should be able to do this, certain preliminaries are necessary. The player must be a person who is used to social contacts: he must enjoy being with people, and find it amusing to fit into rules which have been made by other people and in the designing or altering of which he has no share.

When the rougher games are considered there comes an edge to this situation. The player must not only be willing to fit in with rules, but two further sacrifices are asked of him: he must be prepared to be knocked about by his opponents, and to take good temperedly a certain real amount of discomfort and pain. He must furthermore be prepared to sink his own personal glory into a corporate desire to seek glory for the team of whom he forms a part. For certain natures this is impossible. They are quite unable to see any reason Why they should adopt the rules of other people, and their social sense is not strong enough to make it possible for them to feel any pleasure in working with or for a team of their fellows.

The word "play" therefore, when it is used as an alternative for the word " game ", when this is applied to adults, carries a very rich meaning. It involves a certain' attitude of the self to the self, a physical easiness of the self within its own bodily house, an attitude to society, an enjoyment of social actions, a willingness to endure pain if necessary, and, which is very important, a disciplined control of aggressive moods. Any group game, however simple, contains a continuous variety of emotional experiences for each of those who take part in it. Consider, for example, the child playing "touch". At one moment he is part of a group being chased; he feels himself a quarry chased by a hunter, and has all the emotions of the quarry. Then comes a sudden touch, he is caught, and, after a momentary feeling of being a captive, he becomes. in his turn the hunter, with permission to enjoy the excitement of the chase. To play the game well and to enjoy the play, the child must rejoice in this change and interchange of emotions within the game. These changes are of the very nature of healthy childhood, and it is the desire to experience or express this very turmoil of emotion that lies at the root of much zest in group games. A child who is fixed in a certain attitude, always aggressive, always timid, always shy, etc., is totally unable to share in such games.

Turn now to the use of the word "play" as applied to the actor. An actor plays a part. What do we mean when we say that he does this? What is it that makes it possible for him to do so?

First of all, he must be able to take so keen an interest in the character he is to depict that he is able for the time being to put aside interest in his own personality.

Secondly, he must have already acquired the ability to sit lightly to the physical expression of his own personality: he must know his own habitual gestures, manner of walking, habits of speech, sufficiently to be able voluntarily to discard them.

Thirdly, he must be able to conceive of his relationship to other people for the time being, not as he would desire it himself, but as it is dictated to him by the author and the producer.

The trained actor walking into his part is in a position very similar to the trained squash player taking up his racket; both of them are people who have learned to put a distance between their inner selves and the actions they are about to undertake, so that the ordinary habitual self with its impatiences, its hesitations, its irritations, can be doffed and the new personality, the personality of smooth, quick action of the squash player or the new character of the actor assumed instead.

Is the same true for the final use of the word, the “play” of light and shadow of the fire-light, the “play” of spears of our original quotation?

The artist is a man who normally does not play games, but this third use of the word “play”—the “play” of light and shadow—is to him his life absorption. What have we here? Why does the same word apply? What exactly is it that holds the artist’s attention?

The changing light on a scene, the design and pattern of form in a landscape, are things which the artist’s eye beholds in that to which he attends. If he is to introduce them or his idea of them, or in any way to create out of his vision a work of art, he must be able once again to subordinate his other daily interests, passions and desires to this absorption in something which is outside himself: he must be able to surrender himself to his delight in this very “play”, and it is this “play” which must give him delight. Once again he must have such a control over the instrument of his own body that he can make it do what is necessary to create for himself this response to something which exists independently of him, as the rules of football and cricket exist independently of the player, and the dramatic character of the actor. And furthermore, he must enjoy it for its own sake. The actor who plays to win a high salary, the painter who paints to sell his pictures, each in his turn deliberately changes the mood and the content of his action, and in the general condemnation of art of this kind, the public appreciation of the truth underlying what I am trying to put before you, is shown.

To sum up, therefore, the use of the word “play” for all these apparently unconnected activities is not chance but reality. The qualities demanded of the individual who “plays” in any of these senses are the same although their expression is various.

Let us then look at these qualities a little more closely and see why we should cultivate them: what play should be in our lives and why fitness for play is important to us ?

In the old cliché that “Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton”, something very real is hidden. The essence of these words, absurd in some ways as they now are, is a truth which is absolutely vital to the spirit and even to the existence, and certainly to the power of our own nation. The capacity to play denotes an ability in the individual to study his own self, his muscles, body, his reactions, his presentation of himself, in such a way that he becomes master of them instead of they of him, so that he can sit lightly to himself and interpose a subtle joint as it were between his passions and his action. The tennis player who contracts the muscle of his arm and then swings his wrist in a wide and easy circle for the delivery of an exactly aimed over-head service is a good picture of the mature man and his control of his emotional life. Without the health, the drive, the energy, the well-developed muscle, the trained knowledge and the quick eye of the good tennis player, there would be no force or drive in the ball, even if its direction were exact: it would either not reach over the net, or come with so feeble an energy as to offer merely a target for defeat. Were there, however, no wrist, no matter how forceful the emotions within the mind of the player serving an effective shot, especially when the score stands at an advantage against him, he would merely beat the air with a strong and forcible shot landing somewhere in the trees beyond the opponent’s court. The effectiveness of his stroke depends upon the combination of force and detachment.

This is not an idle simile: every adult human being today is called upon to live his life in a world very like that which could be caricatured by the picture of thousands of muscular men and women with rackets, cricket bats, golf clubs upraised in their hands, with fury in their minds and a complete absence of rules, or even of the ability to discriminate between friend and opponent. We are all stirred every day to strong emotional feelings about some part of our experience, horror, ambition, fear, shrinking from, aggression towards, all kinds of groups inside and outside our own country. Emotion uncontrolled and acting without that loose and subtle joint between the feeling and the action leads to massacre and wars, terrors and failures. It is very difficult for a man to gain such a knowledge of himself and such a control of himself as will conserve the energy of the emotion without suppressing it, and yet put the individual absolutely in control of its direction and expression; and the function of corporate life, whose work it is to secure this power for the individual, is the function of play. It is significant that with the gradual dimming of true perception by muddle, distress, national and international suffering and

passion, so the spirit of play in a nation begins to decline, the village football teams and cricket teams diminish and disappear, and the gate-money and the football pools increase and multiply. We stop playing games ourselves, and instead we purchase other people and watch them playing against each other in order that we may win money out of the result.

This is to mark the deterioration of the country. A people who cannot sit lightly to their own characters and to their own emotions, so that they may wield them with power and direction, as they wield their cricket bats and golf clubs, and take keen enjoyment in the mastery they are winning, is a people that falls an easy prey to agitators, demagogues and all those false prophets whose power lies in their ability to drive their people into a passion-driven mob.

Many people cannot play; they are locked within the prison of their own personality; they have no control of their bodies—their bodies control them. They have never learned the first joy that is the birthright of every human being, the sheer fun of a well-oiled, well-moving physical system; they are incapable of obeying rules, they cannot be bothered to learn the shape and the subtleties of set forms of action; they are unsocial, shy of their fellows, or wishing always to be the centre of attention; they cannot take a holiday from their own concerns and lose themselves for refreshment in something that is not themselves; and finally, they have never learned the fun it is to take minor injury and pain with cheerfulness, because it is encountered in the pursuit of a genuine joy.

These are people who are half alive. They are losing the special privilege of being humans, and particularly the privilege of being British. They are letting slip their splendid heritage, the heritage of a nation that has always understood that the basis of sound judgment is the capacity to take a holiday, to "play" games with enjoyment. They are becoming enfeebled, stiff and joyless and losing one of the essential qualities that make life worth living.

When this has been lost, it cannot be picked up in a day. To determine, as you go out from this lecture, "I won't be a half-man any longer, I will learn to play", is not enough; "play" is a fine and dignified expression of one of the profoundest realities in life, and it cannot be picked up at will like a pin from the floor. I have been asked to speak in this series of lectures because it is realised by those people who care about these things, that to get back the spirit of play is a task that needs consistent effort and social health; it must be done in groups and everyone's help is needed. It is genuinely part of a real campaign to be ourselves once more; not to train specialists who will win Marathon events for us, not to produce super-perfect teams that will go abroad and beat all comers, but to get ourselves back to the heritage that we have always had of a humorous, balanced, self-reliant,

detached and basically sane people, who are able to hold up their heads internationally because they do not let themselves be deluded by catch-words, and to combine the passion for social service with a full recognition of the other man's rights and a humorous delight in individual quality. These things have always been the corner-stone of our peculiar life, and they can be won and retained only upon a basis which recognises that the ability to play and the delight in "play" is the corner-stone of sanity.