

***Love and Play.* Andrew M. Greeley. New York: Seabury Press, 1977.**

Introduction

Playfulness can occur in human relationships (especially sexual) only in an environment created by *permanent commitment*.

“‘Good’ (fun) sex can only be sustained in a context of a long-term commitment to one’s partner, and ‘good’ (moral) sex in marriage can grow only when playfulness characterizes all the dimensions of the intimacy between husband and wife.”

Assumptions:

1. Illumination must be sought with regard to the fundamental ambiguity of human sexuality before any specific sexual ethical questions should be answered.
2. Principal concern = the dilemmas and ambiguities experienced by those who are more or less permanently committed to one another.
3. There is a very close connection between sexuality and religion.

Chapter ONE

“The trouble with ‘sex as play’ philosophy as articulated in its adolescent statement in *Playboy* and now *Playgirl* or in its much more sophisticated version of so-called scientific experts, is not that it misunderstands sex. The trouble is that it misunderstands play. Sex is a game, all right, and an uproariously funny one at that; but the ‘play’ crowd has long forgotten what a game is.”

“Sex is either *playful* or it becomes a difficult burden, an obligation, a tension release that produces only minimal satisfaction. A marriage is either a playful relationship, a relationship between playmates (‘mates who play’), or it is an intolerable version.”

“Children can play because they have the *fundamental capacity to create worlds of fantasy* and festivity that are ‘real’ but distinct from the other real world.”

“The tragedy of growing up, for most of us at any rate, is that we lost this imaginative capacity to create a world of play.”

Playful adult = developed skills to enable his dreams and celebrations to *give shape and color and tone to the totality of his life*.

Sex = one of the greatest of games, and should permeate the rest of the relationship and the rest of life.

Play is *relational*.

“A child need not risk much by inviting another child into his fantasies, his dreams, his celebrations, his festivities. But an adult, presumably admitted to the rigorous demands of the

mundane world, exposes himself quite completely when he invites another to share fantasy and celebration with him.”

The *question* arises: “In a grim world of sickness, noisy children, miscarriages, drunken husbands, employment worries, frustrations, disillusionments, and disappointments can one seriously believe that play is possible, desirable, or necessary?”

And the Christian symbol system answers: “*Play is indeed possible and is in fact the only adequate response to the Christian message of joy preached in the Gospel.*”

If play is possible for adults and if enjoyment of fun and games is an appropriate response to the Good News we have heard, then sex should become fun and games.

“Christian lovers dance and play together because they believe that life, for all its tragedy, is still ultimately a comedy, indeed, a comic, playful dance with a passionately loving God.”

Meaning is of central importance.

A couple can *interpret* their sexual encounters in almost any way they want; how they interpret them will have a profound influence on both the quality of each encounter⁴ and their entire relationship with each other.

E.g., “Is it an act of play celebrated in the midst of a universe that both lovers believe to be benign and gracious or in an oppressive and absurd universe which can punish and destroy?”

Sexual play cannot be ‘casual’/‘spontaneous’ for two reasons:

1. Play by its very nature is not casual (i.e., the game has norms of seriousness which are indispensable).
2. Whether sex is playful or not depends ultimately on what meaning we give to our sexual encounter, and questions of meaning in human life are never easy, simple, casual ones.

G.K. Chesterton: “The more serious the situation, the more playful the Christian must be.”

Only discipline, practice, and self-control can enable one to be playful in deadly serious situations.

“Most marriages are both too serious to be playful and not serious enough. They are too serious because the burdens, the responsibilities, the discouragements, the frustrations of life make the relationship so heavy, so oppressive that there is no room for fantasy and celebration. And they are not serious enough, because neither partner has expended the effort, the energy, and the discipline of the perseverance, the patience, to become professional in the skills that this particular relationship requires.”

The sexual encounter offers *hints* of an *explanation* of the persons, their sexuality, their love, their life, and of the universe – an intuition that *much more is possible* in their lovemaking and in the totality of life together, and, indeed, in the totality of life itself.

The critical question is whether that hint ought to be taken seriously or brushed aside when they return, all too quickly, to the ordinary, mundane world.

Chapter TWO

Dilemmas of contemporary marital sexuality:

- ◆ Sexual yearnings draw a man and woman together; interpersonal strains force them apart.
- ◆ Self-fulfillment is the goal of marriage, but the work necessary to hold the marriage together seems to preclude the possibility of such fulfillment.

The Christian vision critiques the Stoic life that is mundane and dull as well as the Hedonist life that is shallow, superficial, rootless.

“The common life as an absolutely indispensable context for playfulness. Playfulness in its turn is absolutely indispensable to keep the common life from becoming intolerably oppressive.”

The Christian vision of a ‘playful God’ gives them an extremely powerful religious symbol to reinforce their search for a mixture of responsibility and playfulness, seriousness and frolic.

Two convictions are necessary:

1. Sex has a built-in strain toward playfulness, which can be resisted only at the price of reducing the payoffs and the binding power of sexual intimacy.
2. Playfulness cannot survive unless it is rooted in the context of a long-term, sustained, total human relationship, one underpinned by the fundamental conviction of the possibility of hope and of love.

“Most men and women know that they are capable of much more in their sexual lives than they permit themselves to experience and that there is immense room for growth and development in sexual pleasure and playfulness if they can find the time, the energy, and the courage and honesty to seek such development.”

“Skill at any kind of game requires patience, practice, perseverance, commitment.” (These are especially needed when the game requires a partner.)

It is also necessary that there be at least some kind of interpersonal trust and affection between play-ers.

Even play among children requires that the fellow players make adjustments to the rhythms of each other’s play.

Individuality is not lost but enhanced through cooperative effort.

“Good play is both elegant and fun, the elegance comes from skill and self-discipline and not from spontaneous exhibitionism.”

Play results from *practiced ease*.

“To be good at anything requires commitment, effort, endurance, patience. Anyone who suggests differently simply doesn’t understand what life is all about.”

“All the rich, elaborate mystery of another human being’s body and spirit simply cannot be discovered except in a long-term relationship.”

“Unless one begins to understand the mysteries of another’s personhood, then playfulness and the variety which is the fruit of playfulness will not even begin to exist.”

“If one believes that sexual playfulness involves the sharing of that which is best in both body and spirit, one must inevitably conclude that time, patience, practice, and commitment are as absolutely essential for the sexual game as they are for any other.”

‘Play’ involves *trust, confidence, care*.

“The complex psychological and physiological skills required for intimacy and for intimate playfulness must be learned throughout a lifetime. Whenever we think we have learned it all about loving another human being, then we have in fact retired from the game of love.”

“If you want depth, richness, variety, and playfulness in your sexual expressions, there is simply no other way to have it than to acquire a partner and settle down to a long life of exploration, revelation, experimentation and growth, development, mistakes, learning, progress, effort, patience, practice, and perseverance.”

“It is a shame when humans settle for something less than what might have been, especially when it might have been had with only a little more courage, a little more trust, a bit more willingness to take risks, a little bit more faith.”

“The Holy Spirit is a wheeling, dealing, whirling, twirling, dancing, darting, poltergeist Deist who flits and leaps, spins, and dives, dashes in madcap movement through the cosmos, flicking out sparks of creativity and vitality wherever he goes.”

Can one believe in this madcap, merry Spirit and still believe that playfulness is unimportant, unrequired, indeed impossible in human sexuality?

Chapter THREE

Part of the excitement of any game is its *mystery*.

“As an absolutely indispensable prerequisite for sexual playfulness, a man and a woman must be determined to get to know one another, which means that they must be determined to commit themselves to *endless exploration* of the heights and depths and breadths of the mysteries of each other’s selfhood.”

“To explore the depths of someone else’s personality is the most erotic thing a human being can do, and when that exploration is reinforced and facilitated by sexual

lovemaking, the lovemaking becomes an episode in a grand adventure, taking on an intensity that it would otherwise not have.”

It is difficult to make the leap from accepting our own complexities and mystery to realizing that everyone else is as baffling as we are.

Without ‘*influence*’ there can be no possibility of growth within a relationship. By ‘*influence*’ I mean the ability to obtain desired behavior from another human being.

‘*Influence*’ in intimate relationships can be bad or good; it is good when used to promote the growth of the best dimensions of another’s personality and bad when it is used to manipulate and constrain him.

Significant influence is based on a knowledge that comes from a serious and sustained exploration of the depths of the other’s self.

With our knowledge we become skilled at creating an environment in which the other is almost certain to respond the way we want – and the way that is best in him wants.

We know so little about those who are close to us for three reasons:

1. It never occurs to us that we are living in a house with a mystery that can be a source of endless fascination and enjoyment.
2. We are too busy thinking about ourselves and worrying about what the other is thinking about us to try to figure out what is going on inside her/him.
3. To explore the mystery of another human is work, and we are lazy.

How do we break through strangeness?

1. Pay attention to what we already know but have not bothered to interpret.
2. Learn from cues that have been there all along but which have been missed.
3. Probe beyond the facts about the intimate stranger to get at the real person.

“We do not force the mysteries and the secrets out of another human being; we seduce them out by attention, affection, encouragement, reassurance, and laughter.”

“When the spouse becomes an intimate, mysterious stranger, an enticing, irresistibly attractive stranger, the stage is set for sexuality to begin. The players may begin as amateurs, but so long as they realize that there is much to learn, there is no reason why they should not eventually become professionals.”

“As we find the other who is out love, we also find ourselves, and in the process the two of us may begin to find the other who is our Lover.”

As St. Paul says, sexual union is a great sacrament which reveals the intimacy of God with his creatures.

“When a man and woman are locked in embrace they come for a few brief seconds close to the core of the greatest Mystery of them all.”

Chapter FOUR

"To have a playmate means to be in possession of someone who has made themselves a specialist in your physiology-psychology-fantasy life. It means that you belong to someone who has devoted long years and much practice to understanding you and is perfectly happy continuing to practice and perfect his skills. It means that you have yielded yourself to the other's power and influence."

Sexual playfulness begins in earnest only when one has given oneself to another so totally that there is simply no way back.

"Real playmates are scary people because they want us body and soul."

Another person will be a playmate for us to the extent that we are fierce and determined enough to take possession of the other even as she/he is possessing us.

"Sex is between people, not merely between bodies. People are different; one can reach orgasm with a prostitute, but one can only play with another human being whom he knows. And that brings us up against the mystery of another person's self."

Human persons have fears, anxieties, needs, longings, and, above all, complex systems of meaning which interpret for us all the events of our life, particularly those that challenge us most directly as men and women.

"The real playmate is one who has achieved a high degree of competency in dealing with us because she/he shares our body, our spirit, our fantasy-life, and our meaning systems."

Sexual competency must be learned, and learned with a particular other.

"You can only admit that you are not good at something in the presence of another who is already sufficiently impressed by you that your admission of incompetence is not likely to diminish his respect for you."

"When we admit our lack of competence and our inadequacies in circumstances where there is already love and affection, then we are engaged precisely in that process of self-disclosure and self-revelation which is already erotic play."

Playfulness requires the freedom to learn by mistakes, failures, trial and error.

Techniques are relatively unimportant when compared with the *fundamental dynamics of a relationship*.

"Playfulness in bed and playfulness in the totality of a relationship mutually reinforce one another."

Play is competitive – in marriage, such conflict and competition is a way of working out tensions, of balancing needs, and of strengthening the bonds that hold the joint venture together.

E.g., Jacob contending with the angel of Yahweh.

"They *struggle* together in order that they may *struggle together*."

“Sexual competitiveness is indescribably erotic. If each partner is struggling to be better than the other sexually, it necessarily means that each is struggling to be better at giving pleasure to the other than taking it for oneself.”

Sexual competition becomes unhealthy in two circumstances:

- i. One of the partners won't play.
- ii. One of the partners won't let the other play.

“Sexual competitiveness between a husband and wife enhances the sex game only when there is relative equality among the contestants, which means that the husband must be brave enough to lose some of the encounters and the wife brave enough to win some of them.”

The playmate must have the *vigor* and *resourcefulness* to tear away the masks and the defenses, the protections, the phony fears, the silly anxieties – all those escape hatches one uses to flee the terrors and delights of the sexual game.

This requires *confidence*.

“Competency grows when confidence is a given.”

One must constantly support, re-enforce, and build the partner's ego strength.

“The style with which a couple pursues mastery of sexual playfulness depends upon the style of their personalities and the style of their relationship.”

‘Mastery’ comes only with self-conscious *energy* and *effort*.

The essence of playfulness is not so much that there is a necessity to do anything, but that there is an opportunity to do practically everything.

Chapter FIVE

Sexual fantasy is universal, appealing and powerful, but is also a very awkward subject for discussion.

Sexual fantasies are part of the *ambiguity* of the human condition.

There are four general kinds of frequent sexual fantasies:

1. Fantasies of *nakedness*.

To be exposed is to be seen, enjoyed, possessed.

Putting on and taking off clothes is a behavior that is inherently playful with an almost limitless variety of playful possibilities.

2. *Rape* and being raped.

It is of the essence of fantasy rape that one is forced to do something that one desperately wants to do, or that one forces the other to do something that the other desperately wants to do.

3. *Seduction* and being seduced.

Focus on the slow, gentle art of taking possession of or being possessed by the other.

4. Fantasies that have to do with *variety* of position, place, and organs involved.

The imagination contemplates a wide variety of interesting possibilities.

Fantasies are a way to *release emotional and psychic energy*, dangerous only if they become so compulsively important that real human relationships and responsibilities are ignored, or if one seriously begins to turn the fantasies into reality.

These fantasies also reveal to us that we are creatures with powerful, deep, complex hungers.

For sexual partners it seems foolish not to exploit the potentiality for focusing fantasy energy in exciting, challenging, and delightful playfulness.

“Fantasy does not provide a detailed outline for reality, but it does open up some interesting possibilities. What possibilities will be pursued depends on the people involved.”

Fantasies are more likely to be shared in slow gradual self-revelation “as a total relation grows in trust and expands in affection.”

Two conclusions are to be drawn:

1. No one is dull; the imagination is *active, ingenious, creative, energetic*.
2. “The polymorphous perversity of our imagination reveals us as creatures *hungering for the absolute* in fulfillment and love.”

Chapter SIX

Sexual play is *festive*.

‘Early man’ *celebrated* but one thing: *life* – he celebrated the precarious triumph of life over death and of order over chaos.

In these celebrations, *sex and religion* were inextricably mixed: these were festivals of life and fertility, and the most powerful life force in themselves and in other creatures that humans knew was sex.

“That sex was celebration and that celebration was sexual was so self-evident to archaic people that they would not even have thought to question it.”

In these celebrations, there was *public* sexual play (albeit highly objectified and ritualized).

We have made sex private and profane.

“The web of meaning that supported sex in its objective playfulness has been sundered. The burden is almost entirely on the man and woman themselves to create a web of meaning on their own, in which subjective playfulness can grow and in which sexual celebration can survive when it is enjoyed subjectively.”

Sex is a *celebration* of both its own overwhelming pleasure and power and all the other good things that the powers of light and life have made available to us.

“Sex is an act of *gratitude* whether it is enjoyed or recognized. It is a celebration of the goodness in being a man or a woman, the goodness that is in being human with a capacity for sexual union. Sex is not merely communion; it is also Eucharist. It is an act of thanksgiving to the other, to the self, to whatever power there may be in the universe that has made this goodness possible.”

“If Jesus came to bring us richer and more abundant life, then it is an inevitable consequence of his coming that our sex ought to be richer and more abundant. If it has not become so in the years that have elapsed since the appearance of Jesus, the fault is not in the brilliance of the clarity of his message but in our own fear and timidity and refusal to take him seriously, a refusal which consists essentially in not believing that when Jesus *said* ‘life’ he *meant* ‘life’.

The contribution of a religious interpretive scheme to a sexual relationship can be considered on three levels:

1. It can sweep away the restraints, the fears, the inhibitions.
2. It encourages them to further exploration and growth together not only in their sex life but in all the dimensions and aspects of their common life together.
3. A life-celebrating religion gives them the faith, the courage, and the hope they need to keep celebrating together when the going gets tough, and when the anti-life forces, which are still powerfully at work in the cosmos, threaten to drain the vitality, trust, and hope out of their relationship.

Chapter SEVEN

There is a strain toward *hilarity* in the world of play: ‘play can be *funny*’.

Laughter dispels strains, tensions, fears, and enables people to become playful.

Nakedness can be funny.

“We expect people to wear clothes, and when they don’t it is a startling contrast. The dignity, the reserve, the aloofness, the coolness to which we pretend all slip away and we stand revealed in our alliance to the animal kingdom.”

Sexual arousal is even funnier.

“The contrast between the pose of complete self-possession, which humankind maintains most of the time, and fierce animal desire, which dominates the sexual encounter, is extremely funny.”

“Humans look ridiculous as they make love only because of the contrast between their amorous thrashings and the dignity and self-control that mark their upright life is so dramatic.”

Laughter dispels fear.

Sex is a scary business, for in it we put ourselves on the line both physically and psychologically in a way we do in practically no other kind of activity.

Laughter in sex is a response to fear: "Lovers laugh together at themselves and at one another because they are afraid of the power of their sexuality, because they are afraid of one another, but also because they are convinced that they can transcend the fear and find out that their sexuality and their sexual fears are even more delightful than they are terrifying."

Chapter EIGHT

"The question of 'yes' or 'no' is not only sexual; it is the most basic and fundamental human and religious question that can be asked. Does one want to live fully or cautiously? Does one wish to be open or constricted, risk-taking or cynical? Playful people have playful sex, and their sexual playfulness reinforces and strengthens their playfulness as people. We become playful people only when we say 'yes' to the opportunities that the Spirit of Life, with implacable insistence, offers us every day. For most people, the sexual partner to whom they are committed in a sustained relationship is the biggest single opportunity they will ever receive. It is the decisive opportunity, and whether they say 'yes' or 'no' will shape everything else that happens in their lives."

Chapter NINE

Puritanism is a remarkable strong element in human culture.

Puritanism is fundamentally a *fear of sexuality*.

The recognition of *human weakness* (Paul, Augustine, Luther) provided a perfect opening for Puritanism to creep in and almost take possession of Christianity.

"Christianity is now in the process of exorcising puritanism from the Christian tradition. Puritanism survived as long as it has because it turns out to be a useful shield under which fear can hide."

Fear of human sexuality seems to be built into the human condition, and it is a good thing to be afraid of it; but it is not merely enough for the Puritan to caution about sex, he must also pronounce a condemnation of it.

"The Puritan does not want to hear that we should have a healthy respect for the power of sexuality to get us into trouble. What he wants to hear is a simple statement that sex will always get us into trouble."

"Puritanism is a defense against the attractiveness of others, a defense against the out-going dimensions of our own personality. It is a defense against the consuming demand to come forth that we hear from within ourselves and from some Other, who seems to be calling to us from Out There."

"By donning the mantle of goodness and virtue the puritan can be as nasty, as vicious, as vindictive and as punitive as he wants. Everything he does, he argues, is done to protect virtue and morality."

Goal = sex without unreasonable or inappropriate fear, sex that is enjoyable, playful, rewarding, festive, fantastic, and gunny, and sex which at the same time recognizes its own demonic and ecstatic dimension.

“Between the hedonism that sees only delight and the Puritanism that sees only terror there ought to be a middle path that sees both terror and delight, with delight strong enough to laugh at terror and thereby make it even delightful.”

Chapter TEN

Love makes possible the atmosphere of trust, confidence, of festivity, fantasy, and wit that is essential for play to begin. Play, in turn, enhances all these characteristics in a common life together.

It is the thought of *death*, explicit or implicit, which inhibits love and restrains playfulness.

Love is death-defying – to love means to say ‘You shall not die!’

“If no evil power, however strong, can overcome love, then there is no reason not to play.”

The *fundamental option* that guides our life is made slowly and gradually: for or against playfulness, for or against hope, for or against laughter.

Many non-playful American marriages are caught in ‘resentment,’ ‘self-pity,’ and ‘obligation.’

Options can be modified and even changed; it is never too late to start over.

“Death will happen anyhow. The question is whether we will go through life in constant terror of it or whether we can go through life laughing at it because we believe we will conquer that terror.”

