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**Touchstones Project**

**Small Group Discussion Guide**

**Play**

**Preparation:** (Read the *Touchstones Journal* on the theme and the questions below.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** “…We misunderstand play itself, casting it as exuberant, silly…. But play is serious. Play is absolute. Play is the complete absorption in something that doesn’t matter to the external world, but which matters completely to you. …Play is a disappearance into a space of our choosing, invisible to those outside the game. It is the pursuit of pure flow, a sandbox mind in which we can test new thoughts, new selves. It’s ...symbolic living, a way to transpose one reality onto another and mine it for meaning. Play is a form of enchantment.” *Katherine May*

**Chalice Lighting** (James Vila Blake), adapted.

(In unison) Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human needs, and to help one another.

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering, where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes and to honor your time limit.

**Read the Wisdom Story**: Take turns reading the following wisdom story.

*Wisdom Story: The Way of the Otter* by Julie Simon, adapted

Daniel firmly grips his paddle and pulls hard against the water. He watches as the paddle tip dives below the surface, then leaves behind a tiny whirlpool as the paddle rises above the water. The kayak glides forward. He peers into the tall cattails arching above the sides of the kayak and scans for mud chutes. A light breeze moves his hair back from his eyes. But he cannot see the banks at all in the dim dawn light.

They paddle on and soon emerge from the cattails and reeds of the marsh channel, into a small open stream. The sun climbs and glows up over the horizon. Now Daniel can see muddy, grassy chutes among the roots and bushes covering the banks of the stream.

“Mom, over there,” he whispers, pointing to some marshy grasses across from the second chute. “We can wait over there. If we’re quiet, they won’t notice us.”

They slowly paddle the kayak to the spot Daniel has suggested, backing it in so they can look out at the mud chute, undetected among the grasses. Then they wait—quiet and watchful—breathing in the moist air. Daniel is prepared to wait the whole morning—or longer—if need be. He is an experienced otter spotter.

As they wait, Daniel remembered when he first learned about river otters. He was five or six, and his mother gave him a book for his birthday. It was *My Little Book of River Otters* by Hope Marston. He asked his mother to read it to him so often that he memorized the words. That book led him to learn as much about river otters as possible. While he knew that otters loved to play, he realized that young otters developed essential survival skills by playing, like how to hunt for food. In addition, playing with rocks improved skills like opening mussels and clams. Playing also helped strengthen their bonds with other otters. Daniel loved his kayak trips with his mother to watch the otters. He often imagined that he was playing with them.

On this morning, he did not have to wait very long. Three river otters scampered along the bank. They have long, slender, brown, fur-covered bodies, with long narrow tails, and cute faces with long whiskers. One is much bigger than the other two. A mom and her two pups are out looking for breakfast. They slide down the mud chute into the stream unaware that they are being watched. Daniel is excited but he stays quiet, hardly breathing with delight.

The otters dive underwater looking for small fish, clams, and crayfish. They each find a meal and climb up the bank to enjoy it. Then the otters slide back down the chute and dive for more food. One of the pups must be full. He quickly emerges from under the water with a rock instead of a fish, flips onto his back, and tosses the rock between his front paws. He looks like he is juggling.

Daniel can barely keep back his giggles. But he is hoping for even more fun. Sure enough, after the other pup eats her fill of fish, she joins her brother, juggling two rocks while floating on her back. Then her brother decides it’s time to play slide and chase. He dashes up the bank and slides down the chute on his stomach. He lands in the stream with a swoosh, then dives and swims up beside his sister. She rolls and drops her rocks. The two pups splash and roll across the stream. They chase each other up the bank and down the mud slide over and over again.

Eventually, Momma Otter finishes her breakfast too. She joins the pups in the slide-and-chase game. They are three otters rolling and splashing and frolicking in the water.

Finally, Daniel can no longer contain his laughter. He giggles through his

fingers. The otters stop and look over at the reeds where Daniel and his mom are hidden. Then they scramble up the bank and disappear into the shrubs. Daniel sighs a tired, contented sigh. Now he will go have his own breakfast. He has seen the play of the otter.

Source: https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/wonder/session10/otter

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group

Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl as follows. Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” Pablo Picasso

“Children who play creatively find multiple uses for objects. They can transform a blanket into a tent one day and a cave the next. A stick can be a magic wand, a sword, a lightsaber, or a mast for a schooner.” Susan Linn

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” Fred Rogers

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.” John Muir

“Play is the foundation of learning, creativity, self-expression, and constructive problem-solving. It’s how children wrestle with life to make it meaningful.” Susan Linn

“Play is the primary way children were designed to learn.” Kathy Hersh-Pasek & Roberta Golinkoff

“The drive to play freely is a basic, biological drive. Lack of free play may not kill the physical body, as would lack of air, food, or water, but it kills the spirit and stunts mental growth.” Peter Gray

“Culture arises and unfolds in and as play.” Johan Huizinga

“The world of pretend play is one in which children can be free to express themselves, their ideas, their emotions, and their fantastic visions of themselves, of other people, and of the world.” Sandra Russ

“The imagination is an essential tool of the mind, a fundamental way of thinking, an indispensable means of becoming and remaining human.” Ursula K. Le Guin

“To the art of working well a civilized race would add the art of playing well.” George Santayana

“Play matters because people matter. It reminds us of our interdependence and gives us a chance to really see other people. And in turn, to be really and truly seen.” Jill Vialet

“Creative people are curious, flexible, persistent, and independent with a tremendous spirit of adventure and a love of play.” Henri Matisse

“Play is hard to maintain as you get older. You get less playful. You shouldn’t, of course.” Richard Feynman

“Creativity and the world of the imagination—the beauty of what we see as a child and the kind of play that we experience as a child—can be a way for us to survive tough times.” Diane Paulus

“The very existence of youth is due in part to the necessity for play; the animal does not play because he is young, he has a period of youth because he must play.” Karl Groos

“A child who does not play is not a child, but the man who does not play has lost forever the child who lived in him.” Pablo Neruda

“It is in playing, and only in playing, that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.” D.W. Winnicott

“When children pretend, they’re using their imaginations to move beyond the bounds of reality. …A small child can be a superhero.” Fred Rogers

“Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play.” Johan Huizinga

“The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery.” Erik H. Erikson

“Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play…. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play…it arises in and as play, and never leaves it.” Johan Huizinga

“It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them.” Leo F. Buscaglia

“We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.” George Bernard Shaw

“Play and playful forms of activity potentially lead towards increasingly complex forms of knowledge, skills and understanding.” Elizabeth Wood

“Give childhood back to children: if we want our offspring to have happy, productive and moral lives, we must allow more time for play, not less.” Peter Gray

“It’s the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives.” Fred Rogers

“Rest until you feel like playing, then play until you feel like resting, period. Never do anything else.” Martha Beck

“I will not play tug o’ war. I’d rather play hug o’ war. Where everyone hugs instead of tugs, Where everyone giggles and rolls on the rug, Where everyone kisses, and everyone grins, and everyone cuddles, and everyone wins.” Shel Silverstein

“Play is a divine quality that you can bring to anything, an attitude and a presence rather than a defined activity. When play is free, and not choreographed by some existing rules and regulations, it is ambiguous, exciting, risky, and open to possibilities.” Robert A. Johnson

“The poet within us loves much of what the child loves: questioning, taking risks, imagining, exploring new possibilities, hugging life, playing!” John Fox

**Sitting in Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions).*

**Reading:** “Deep play is the ecstatic form of play. In its thrall, all the play elements are visible, but they’re taken to intense and transcendent heights. Thus, deep play should really be classified by mood, not activity. It testifies to how something

happens, not what happens. Games don’t guarantee deep play, but some activities are prone to it: art, religion, risk-taking, and some sports…. Deep play always involves the sacred and holy, sometimes hidden in the most unlikely or humble places….” *Diane Ackerman*

**Living the Questions**

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. How did you play as a child?
2. Looking back, do you have any special memories of play in childhood?
3. How much time did you spend in nature? What memories and meanings standout from your time in nature?
4. Were there moments that you would describe as infinite play?
5. What messages did you get as a child or teenager about doing versus being?
6. How have you negotiated doing and being as an adult?
7. How have you dealt with life-work balance? What role, if any, does play contribute to this balance?
8. How do you cultivate playfulness in your life?
9. What are the benefits of play for you?
10. What playful activities remain in your bucket list, if any?
11. What do you make of Sabbath-keeping and/or Sabbath moments?
12. In what ways does your congregation promote playfulness?

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person for the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

**Extinguishing Chalice:** (Elizabeth Selle Jones) We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

**Closing Words:** (Rev. Philip R. Giles)

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*