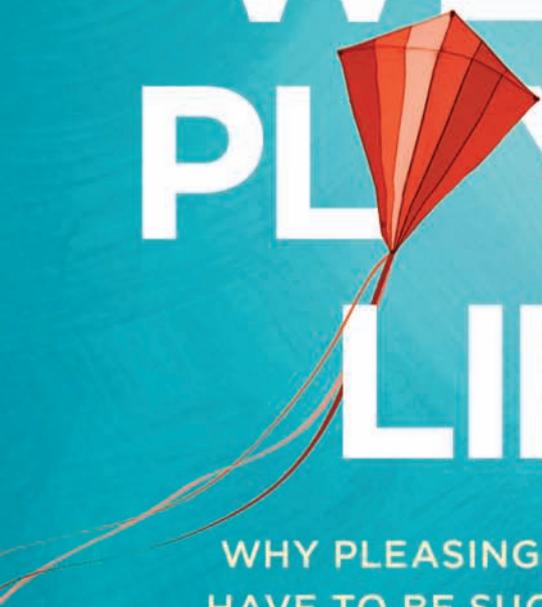


THE WELL- PLAYED LIFE

A red kite with a long tail is flying against a teal background. The kite is positioned in the middle of the title, with its tail extending downwards and to the left.

WHY PLEASING GOD DOESN'T
HAVE TO BE SUCH HARD WORK

LEONARD SWEET

Bestselling author of *Jesus Manifesto*
and *The Gospel According to Starbucks*

The Well-Played Life is an invitation to allow our minds to wander outside the boxes of our own limited understanding, and learn to have fun being God's children. It is a prophetic cry for us to rediscover our ability to enjoy fresh forms of spontaneous expression and unbridled joy. Len makes it very clear how we have forgotten who we are as heirs of the Creator, and how we are to be creative, playful, and have fun! Len's insights are at times intuitive and counterintuitive, and always sensory rich, seeking to feed our all-too-often depleted experience of the abundant life. With wit, wisdom, humor, theological brilliance, and childlike simplicity, Len offers us an invitation to do life differently, perhaps even do life the way God intended.

BISHOP MARK J. CHIRONNA

Church On The Living Edge and Mark Chironna Ministries,
Orlando, Florida

One of the problems with many modern Christians is that their conceptions of faith are too boring. They've taken the God who animates fireflies and makes donkeys talk and imprisoned Him in their systematic theologies and rigid formulations. They've reduced the wild ride of faith to a list of pietistic dos and don'ts or a couple of rituals performed one tiny hour each week. In moments like these, I'm thankful for Leonard Sweet. *The Well-Played Life* is an invitation to splash around in the pools of God's grace and let the wind of the Spirit tickle your cheeks. It's a call to open your eyes to the wonders and joy of God all around us. This book will capture your heart, stir your soul, and set you free to recover a life that is as fun as it is faithful.

JONATHAN MERRITT

Author of *Jesus Is Better Than You Imagined*

The “younger” Len Sweet grows, the more playful, sincere, deep, and beautiful his writings become. He never runs out of fresh ideas, metaphors, and stories, as this book shows more than ever. It offers a provocative and life-changing look at work as play—as God meant it to be. After hearing Len share some of these ideas during a recent visit to South Africa, I anxiously awaited the publication of this book. Yet it surpassed my wildest expectations. Len smartly unfolds the good news for First, Second, and Third Agers that God has put us in the world not to judge us, but to enjoy us. Vintage Sweet—surely! Biblical truths in beautiful new language—undoubtedly!

STEPHAN JOUBERT

Extraordinary professor of contemporary ecclesiology, University of the Free State, South Africa; research fellow, Radboud University, the Netherlands

Len Sweet reminds us that we are all children of a loving Father, and as such we are made to play, create, and enjoy this precious gift called life. This is a needed and timely reminder.

NEIL COLE

Author of *Organic Church*, *Church 3.0*, *Journeys to Significance*, and *Primal Fire*

The Yoda of wordsmithing and cultural insight has delivered another masterpiece. And what a needed piece—in a world where we simply use people and resources with transactional perspectives, with disregard for soul-making. Thanks, Len, for helping us make the connection between the abundant life and the “play-full” life.

REGGIE MCNEAL

Author of *Get Off Your Donkey!* and other non-bestsellers

THE WELL- PLAYED LIFE

WHY PLEASING GOD DOESN'T
HAVE TO BE SUCH HARD WORK

LEONARD SWEET



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The Well-Played Life: Why Pleasing God Doesn't Have to Be Such Hard Work

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Introduction

PLEASING GOD MEANS LIVING IN GOD'S PLEASURE

PLAY BRINGS FAITH TO LIFE. A nineteenth-century immigrant, after passing through Ellis Island by way of the Statue of Liberty, was found walking the tracks of the Lehigh Valley Railroad in New Jersey. On his back and in his arms he carried everything he had brought from the Old Country. Though fatigued and footsore, he shuffled along the rails until an agent stopped him and warned him to get off the tracks lest he be hit by a train or arrested for trespassing.

The man refused, instead producing a railroad ticket good from Jersey City to Scranton. The agent looked at him in shock and asked why he was walking when he could ride. The immigrant said he thought the ticket gave him only the privilege of walking the rails. He almost danced for joy when he learned that he could ride the train instead of trudging the tracks.¹

“We’ve got a ticket to ride!” is how the Beatles put the invitation to love and play. One wonders how the heavenly host look at us, slogging along and working our way through life, when we were given free passage to rise, ride, and “mount up on wings as eagles.” We were created to be a risen people. Christians are not those who “make life work.” We are those who make life fun.

It's time to abolish work. It's time for a theology of play. After five hundred years, the Protestant work ethic has not made us better disciples, only weary and cranky human beings

struggling in vain to snag the unattainable dangling carrot we have named "assurance" or being driven forward by the damning stick of "eternity." Whether stick or carrot, the donkey's dilemma is the same.

◇

*We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise.*

EMILY DICKINSON

Despite reformers such as Luther, Wesley, Hus, and others who emphasized justification by faith alone, we still would rather think of ways of keeping ourselves "in line" rather than keeping ourselves "in love." How can we make the continental shift from finding our assurance not as attainment but as atonement? How can we find the assurance that comes not from "extreme productivity," as one recent book title has it, but from trusting in the veracity of faith and the ferocity of God's love? How can we move from "My life is in my work" to "My life is in my play"?

When I hear people talk about, with an almost pharisaic pride, the merits of hard work and the desire to be better disciples by adhering to laws and labors rather than grace and quiet, it is like chewing on barbed wire. How quickly the language of faith unwinds a toilet roll of talking points about *toiling* at our creativity, *working* at our relationships, *travailing* at our faith, *working* at improving our lives, *working* at living a more God-filled mission.

How did we get so addicted to work? For many of us, we

bought into a form of the Protestant work ethic that taught us that the harder we work and the more successful we become, the more God is pleased and the more we feel the assurance of our salvation. Even Calvinist Marilynne Robinson, in her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *Gilead*, shows what a misreading of truth this is. Through her character the Reverend John Ames, Robinson shows how God has placed us on earth not to judge us, but to enjoy us, and that our obligations to our Creator are no less aesthetic than moral. “All things are yours . . . things present or things to come.”² Or, as Paul told Timothy, God “gives us richly all things to enjoy.”³

We do our best to make light of our addiction to work, and a whole series of television comedies have explored various aspects of Freud’s dictum: “All there is in life that is worth anything is love and work.”⁴ Beginning with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, proceeding with *Seinfeld*, and culminating with *30 Rock* and *The Office*, some of the most popular, memorialized, and award-winning shows on TV have been those that parodied how we worship our work and work at our play. The only “positive” category in which the United States still shows up #1 in the world is . . . who works the hardest and longest. We are a driven people—driven by the market, driven by greed, driven by excellence, driven by ambition, driven by people pleasing, driven by a consumer economy

◇

There are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient. . . . Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.

MARILYNNE ROBINSON, *GILEAD*

that demands we work harder and harder to fall less farther behind. Who works the hardest and longest has become a bragging right. Preachers are especially notorious for their BMB (Behold-Me-Busy) syndrome. It's even seen as a virtue to kill ourselves from working so hard.

I have been privileged in my life to be mentored by four giants of the pastoral arts: Fred Yoos of Central Presbyterian Church in Geneseo, New York; Luther Ridgeway of Wesley United Methodist Church in Rochester, New York; Bill Quick of Metropolitan United Methodist Church in Detroit; and Frank Harrington of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta.

They were all great pastors, but they all paid the price. Fred Yoos died early from working too hard and trying to please everybody. Luther Ridgeway spent time in a psychiatric hospital from the physical and mental exhaustion of trying to please everybody and working too hard. Though he recovered fully thanks to the therapy of rocks, roses, and a rope of hope named Emma, he died shortly after he retired.⁵ Bill Quick is still alive and teaching at Duke Divinity School, but only after multiple heart attacks from a 24/7 work schedule and serving the wider church.

Frank Harrington is a glass case exhibit for this book. Pastor of the largest Presbyterian church in North America, Frank asked me to give one day a year to his 12,000-member church to lead a "staff retreat." He always began the day with a disclaimer: "Well, Sweet's back. I know he's going to make me mad. I know I'm going to disagree with a lot of what he has to say. But I know I need to listen to him, and if *I* need to, *you* need to. So, Leonard, we're yours for the day."

The last time I was there, I could see in Frank's face how weary and worn he'd become. We ate lunch at a diner, which he took over with his all-consuming presence, until finally, after about fifteen minutes of making the rounds, he sat down in our booth. I leaned over the daily specials he'd ordered for both of us, and whispered so no one else would hear, "Your face shouts, 'Time for a sabbatical,' Frank." When he heard this, he visibly perked up, as if I had paid him a compliment, as if looking weary and worn was a badge of honor.

As a historian, I've thought about how workaholism is perhaps our equivalent to consumption (pulmonary tuberculosis), which became the *chic* of Enlightenment culture in the nineteenth century.

Called the "white plague," consumption was associated with rich, ambitious, and important people. In our day, has workaholism become a

◇

Creativity is intelligence having fun.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

"glamorous plague," one that marks its carriers as diamond-level suffering servants, as spiritual and worthy leaders?⁶

A few weeks after the staff retreat, Frank entered the hospital with pneumonia and never left. His body was too weak to fight off the infection. His friends talked in pious, admiring tones about how "Frank's love for his church killed him," and his obituary celebrated what a "hard worker" he was.⁷

Philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus first met in June 1943, in the lobby at the opening of Sartre's play *The Flies*. It was the beginning of a close friendship and then a

colossal fallout. One evening, Camus asked Sartre, “Why are you trying so hard?”⁸

It’s a good question. Why are so many of us trying so hard at working so hard when we were created to *play* and enjoy our relationships with God, each other, and creation? It’s as if the purveyors of the Protestant work ethic heard Jesus say, “Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you . . . more work.” Protestantism’s “divine taskmaster” and Jesus’ “gospel of labor,” as it came to be called, turned us all into can’t-say-no good workers and aristocrats of suffering. They’ve even cast Jesus as a “working man” who labored for a living. It’s almost as if we’ve taken to heart the sign over the gates at Auschwitz that greeted every victim: *Arbeit Macht Frei* (“Working Makes Free”). It isn’t *work* that makes us free. It’s *grace* that makes us free.

God is conceived of in many ways (e.g., engineer, lion, computer), but seldom as an artist who loves to play and delights in divine creations. G. K. Chesterton is one of the few who approached God as an artist, understood that Creation was creative, and viewed God as a playwright who had written a good drama messed up by the actors. The universe is not God at work, but God at play.

There is no creation without play. Play is oxygen for the imagination, which sparks creativity, which ignites innovation, which combusts in paradigm shifts. All human creation is recreation. God did not create us to work at life, but to play and find joy in living. When Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life,” he didn’t then spend his time on earth showing us how to work harder to attain life by our

own means; he showed us how much God wants to walk with us in the Garden—or what our ancestors referred to as “walking on the King’s highway”—and how playing in our relationships, both divine and human, can make life “joy unspeakable and full of glory.”⁹

The art of living is in play, not work. Our bodies are calibrated for the law of gravity, but our souls are calibrated for laws of levity (grace, lightness, play, joy).

I didn’t first learn this from Jesus. I learned it from piano lessons. You don’t *work* a piano. You *play* a piano.



God . . . is not a mega-manufacturer . . . not a celestial engineer . . . but an artist . . . who made the world . . . simply for the love and delight of it.

TERRY EAGLETON

Mrs. Busick was my earliest piano teacher. She lived only a couple of blocks away on Park Street, but the journey from the ragged upright piano in my house on Bloomingdale Avenue to the majestic grand that greeted me as I entered her front door, and which took up the entire living room of her small duplex, seemed like eons.

I still can remember the seductive kitchen smells that ushered me to my doom at the piano bench, where the judgments of my desultory fingering practices were executed by Mrs. Busick, an imposing woman with a jutting jaw. She would take off her apron as she took up her somber role as

a Scribner music instructor who taught the kids who lived on the Hungry Hill side of town. I soon learned that every lesson was preparation for an annual recital, after which Mrs. Busick's students would receive a reward of a small, chalky statue of one composer or another.

Mrs. Busick could be very patient with me for mistakes made in the middle of a piece. But beginnings and endings were another matter. Especially endings, which she expected to be practiced to perfection.

"You can make a mistake in the beginning or in the middle or in some other place along the way. But all will be forgotten when you make the ending glorious."

This is a book about beginnings, middles, and endings that are glorious. But it's not the kind of book that praises the martyrdom of constrictions and restrictions, the masochism of perfectionism, or the rewards of achievement. This is a book about "music appreciation," where beginnings, middles, and endings are all glorious melodies in the ears of God when played for the pleasure of the Lord. Even more, it is a book about the grace notes and improvised flourishes, both resonant and dissonant, that turn an ordinary life into an extraordinary birthright—and a life of work into a life of play.

I had a short life span as a musician, and an even shorter attention span. Mrs. Busick would rebuke me for abandoning a sheet of music when it did not catch my musical fancy. "Finish what you start," she would say with a stern brow. I will never forget the one time she got so frustrated with me over this that she took the money I had brought for the lesson (almost all in coins, as her payments came straight from my piggy bank) and

threw it disgustedly on the floor, most of it rolling down into the wrought-iron heating vent (to my unsanctified delight).

“Finish what you start.” Today, this phrase rings as words of wisdom in a different sense. How many epitaphs could read, “He lived eighty years, but died forty years ago.” So many die intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, years before their physical deaths. The world is filled with the living dead: joyless, passionless, zeal-less, lifeless Christians. The walking dead abound, and deadness is around every corner. Zombie apocalypse is not always apocalyptic. Zombie Christians are walking among us everywhere. The heart can stop living long before it stops beating. And the work ethic that would consume us has put some in the grave far too early.

“I shall not die, but live,” the psalmist sings in one of the Passover hymns.¹⁰ Have you decided to live and not die? Edna St. Vincent Millay answered that question with resolve: “I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.”¹¹ Too many are dying years ahead of their deaths. Jesus is not asking us to die for those we love. The issue is less whether we are ready to die for our people than if we are ready to live for them.

◇

*Death is not a period that ends
the great sentence of life, but
a comma that punctuates it
to more lofty significance.*

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

When I was growing up, I used to think Christians were people with buns and butch haircuts, wearing dark suits and starched shirts in July, who rarely smiled but waved hankies when they were happy, which was seldom. We have not followed Paul, who instructed us to “never let your zeal flag;

maintain the spiritual glow.”¹² Is your glow on? Are you radiating life?

How do we live and not die? How do we grow and glow throughout all of life? What if we approached every moment of life as a banquet of possibilities and a ballet of serendipities? How can we make our lives as disciples a joyful, playful, and passionate experience of the gospel and not a drudgery of duty?

We don’t start out with a ponderous outlook on life. When we’re young, our world is filled with the joy of play, and by

playing we foster our relationships and engage with the world. We first learn to engage with God in the same way. But what happens after that? Why do we change so much? Why does life become so serious, so work-focused, so disillusioned, and so rigid and joyless for so many? Why have we associated adult disci-

plemanship with Jesus as a solemn, pseudomasochistic affair, when the gospel clearly tells us to be joyful and to “become like little children”? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at our understanding of what it means to *please* God, and how that understanding changes throughout our lives.

Many of us utter these two words—“please God”—many times a day. Then we add a comma, a bit of punctuation that changes everything. “Please, God!” is a plea for help, for additional assistance; the truth is, we’ve already been given everything we need to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹³ The problem is not with God’s insufficient supply (hence the



I tell you the truth: Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

JESUS

comma), but with our inability, or refusal, to receive with joy and praise what we've already been given. We fail to open our hands to be filled with God's bounty because our hands are clasped on other things, or we have confused *pleasing* God with *appeasing* God. But when we engage in our relationship with God with joy and dancing, in *play*, no matter our age, we "please God" by taking pleasure in the gift of life and relationship with the Creator and spreading that joy to others. In God's pleasure, we are blessed, and thus can be a blessing to others.

The Hebrew word translated "to bless" means "to bring a gift to another while kneeling in respect." To be "blessed" by God means to be in a perpetual state both of joyful thankfulness for God's grace that meets us where we are, and of readiness to give of ourselves to others where they are, as we fall on our knees in humble and joyful service before the Lord (as the French carol "O Holy Night" suggests). In our joyful awareness of our blessings, we replace the comma's "request" to be served by God ("Please, God") with the simple-space desire to serve God instead ("Please God")—that is, to be "pleasing in God's sight," and to "make the Lord's face radiate with joy because of you."¹⁴

But "service" is not *work*. Our service is not a matter of grudging obligation, not a matter of "attaining" God's pleasure or salvation through our to-do lists. Our service is a matter of joy and the *warming* of our hearts in love. When we engage with God in faith and love, when we engage with the world in faith and love, we live and serve in God's glowing

◇

It is forbidden to become old.

RABBI NACHMAN OF BRESLOV

pleasure. We mustn't *work* at giving, but *play* at life so passionately that giving becomes part of the weave of our relationships with God and others.

We become what we spend most of our time doing, and like those with whom we spend the most time. Workers become work. Players become play. Workers become workhorses and workaholics. Players become playwrights and playmakers who write the stories of their lives according to a chosen narrative and then “play” those stories with other players.

A wedding ceremony was about to begin. Members of the bridal procession anxiously waited for the organ music to accompany them down the aisle. But there was only silence. One of the ushers tried to get the organist's attention by snapping his fingers. Still there was silence. The usher then tried clapping his hands. Still no response. Finally, the now panicking usher called out the organist's name. “Neil! . . . Neil!” he shouted, . . . and all the people in the church dropped obediently to their knees.

A “blessed” person is one who falls to his or her knees at the drop of a hate or a hurt. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”¹⁵ We truly gift God with our lives when we put our lives into God's hands and entrust ourselves to Christ's resurrection presence and promises. To be blessed is to kneel in humility at the sight of human need and in the light of divine grace. Every person we meet is a hurting human being. We don't all hurt in the same places, but we all hurt. Find the hurt and mainline the soul with blessing.

The older we get, the more we need *allowance* and

permission to play, and the more we need instruction on *how* to play. Children play naturally. They can be talked into playing with anyone—even with those from the other end of the playground. Adults line up as mortal enemies. True greatness is the refusal to recognize anyone as an enemy, only as a fellow hurting human being.

When someone tells you, “That’s not going to win you any popularity contests,” do you begin to launder and lacquer your words to make them acceptable? Or do you say at once, “But I ain’t running for office!” Few things are more uncomfortable than a person who is trying too hard to be liked. If our identity is found in Christ, then it matters less and less what people think of us. If our identity is found in experiencing God’s pleasure, we don’t seek to gather power and popularity for ourselves. If we please God, we’re bound to arouse opposition, because pleasing God leads to uncovering the hate, lies, and evil that enslave the world. Every Good Friday is a reminder that we can’t side with people who are hurting and not get hurt ourselves. We can’t insist on love in a world that hates and not get hated. We can’t take up the challenge of change and not get challenged. We can’t call for sacrifice and not be sacrificed.

This is what it means to embrace the world in holiness. The concept of holiness is one that Jesus redeemed and redreamed with his ministry. For Jesus, holiness is not a set of rules to adhere to or a group of restrictions to obey. Holiness is not about exclusivity, but inclusivity; about how to be in relationships that exude God’s love, rather than excluding God’s blessing. An often mistranslated phrase from the Psalms sums up God’s blessing of holiness as the

joy of the Sabbath feast: “O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness [or, in His holy courts]. Dance before God all the earth.”¹⁶ In Eugene Peterson’s translation of the earliest writing in the New Testament (1 Thessalonians 4:1), Paul instructs us to “please God, not in a dogged religious plod, but in a living, spirited dance.”¹⁷

This phrase, “the beauty of holiness,” quoted in various ways more than seven times in the Bible, depicts a creation filled with the joy of praising God for life, a world living in harmony of relationships, a world attuned to its Creator.

◇

*[Enoch] had this testimony,
that he pleased God.*

HEBREWS 11:5, KJV

To be human is to be alive in spirit. To be a Christian is to be alive in the spirit of Christ. At birth, every undeveloped soul is given a windfall: the breath of God. To develop the soul is to live a Spirit-breathed life. But with the reception of that gift (breathing

in) comes responsibility for that gift (breathing out). That we would be gracious receivers is what brings pleasure to the Giver. What pleases God is that we would become the apple of the Creator’s eye—to bear the fruit and bare the image of Christ in everything we are and do. We are not called to *be* the fruit or to *be* the light (Jesus is both). But we are called to bear the fruit and bare the light.

After taking a call in the locker room, a man asked his racquetball partner, who happened to be a minister, for a favor: “Bro, I’ve got a pastoral situation that maybe you can help me solve. My wife is getting back from visiting her parents in

Ireland for ten days, and she's expecting me to pick her up at the airport. My boss just called and is requiring my presence at a command performance. Is there any way you could help me out and pick her up for me? If I can't be there, I know she'd appreciate someone special."

The minister said: "I'll be glad to pick up your wife, but how will I know what she looks like? I've never seen her before."

"That's easy," the man replied. "When the whole dismal terminal lights up, as if the sun suddenly came from behind the clouds, just find the source of that radiance. That'll be my wife."

I have a name for people who make the world better simply by being in it: *Godplayers*. Wherever they go, they bring with them "something on high," as Van Gogh said of Rembrandt's paintings. Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo that his goal as a painter was "to paint men or women with that *je ne sais quoi* of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colourations."¹⁸ When in Arles, in 1888, Van Gogh couldn't find that "*je ne sais quoi* of the eternal" in people, he went outside at night to paint the stars.¹⁹ We were created to shine like stars in the heavens, to give off a God-loitered, love-littered radiance that, in its sheer play of light, makes the world better. Can anyone say that about you? About me?

Our lives give off a lovely light when Christ lives there. To be a follower of Jesus is not to hide that light, but to let our lives shed the loveliness of their light in every stage of life's journey, with all the changing seasons, challenging conditions,

interrupting detours, roller-coaster kickers. The power of compound faith to move mountains and create new landscapes of hope and love is bestowed not just upon those who “go out” into the world in Jesus’ name. It is also given to those who personate the resurrected life of Jesus in every part of their own lives. Disciples of Jesus do not *mimic* Jesus; we *manifest* him. We are *personators* of Christ, not *impersonators*. Christ’s presence in our lives is more “thereness” than “likeness,” more “withness” than “whatness.” Jesus made our creation in the *imago Dei* more “spit” than “image” (as in “spit ‘n’ image”).²⁰

Jesus intended for his church to be a communion of the baptized, not a power structure or power struggle of bureaucrats. We’ve become a most worldly church. To live in God’s pleasure is not to wield categories of power for power’s sake. It is to know that the healing power of Shalom resides in us with the simple prayer of “Please God.” Weakness is the primary strategy of the Cross. How did Christ conquer death and disarm the devil? How did Christ overcome the “powers” and “principalities” of the world? Through (apparent) weakness. “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”²¹ In weakness are all things possible. In Emmanuel, the world can be healed; in Shalom, the world will find peace.

Disciples do not simply seek to “please God” in every decision. God’s pleasure is not something we earn, but something we receive as a gift. Disciples of Jesus luxuriate in God’s pleasure, and live in such a way that living in God’s pleasure becomes second nature, even the very definition of holiness. Fear of pleasure is a sign of depression and lack of aesthetics.

The pleasure phobia of many Christians mirrors the depressed and ugly state of the church. In fact, there are some divine purposes that can be achieved only through pleasure. That's why God created artists.²²

We know that to please God is the *unum necessarium* . . . the one thing we were created for. But what does it mean to please God in the nitty-gritty of life? How do we find that kind of joy in holiness? And how does that change from when we are five to when we are fifty-five? What does our discipleship look like in the various times of our lives? The need to make discipleship a lifelong mission of living in God's pleasure requires a reframing of what it means to be

“pleasing to God” in every age. To please God is not a goal to be attained or an achievement to be sought. It is the relational awareness of joyfully and faithfully living a Sabbath life clothed

in God's glory. The Lord's Day is the Lord's way—to relish the freedom to dig in the dirt, explore uncharted territories, hike the highest mountains, and spelunk the deepest caverns of our faith and our world—to go outside and play, missionally and relationally, knowing we live in God's protection and favor. To bask in the pleasure of God is to rediscover and relive the Garden story of strolling with God through paradise, yoked in a covenant relationship that clothes us in God's seamless robe of mercy and grace.

The word most often translated “paradise” in English versions of the Bible actually means “garden.” It is the garden



Every art contributes to the greatest art of all, the art of living.

BERTOLT BRECHT

walk from which we come, and the garden walk toward which we go. Playing with God in the Garden is the ultimate metaphor for discipleship. Already in the Garden, God strolls among humanity in the morning dew and evening cool, at dawn and at dusk. To please God is to “go outside,” to go out and into the world to play in God’s presence, according to God’s playbook.²³

To please God, to be pleasing *to* God, is to “walk with Light,” to walk with God in joy, praise, holiness, and humility as image-bearers of the Light.

To experience divine pleasure is not to work at life, but to play at life, to walk daily in the Garden radiance of God’s

pleasure. The greatest compliment paid to anyone in the Bible is the one paid to Enoch: “He walked faithfully with God.”²⁴ We know only this one characteristic of his life, but it was so pleasing to God that it got Enoch what only one

other person in the Bible (Elijah) got—a get-out-of-death-free pass.

Enoch’s walk is a walk available to every one of us. It’s a walk of *relationship*—with all the complexities that implies; a relationship like that of the prophet Jeremiah, who, in one of the most astonishing passages of Scripture, says, “You are righteous, O Lord, and I cannot disagree with you, yet let me talk with you of your judgments.”²⁵ In other words, God is right (by definition), but our relationship with God entitles us to disagree and to argue with God about our disagreements.

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*Play can be faithful and faith
can be playful.*

LIZ LYNN PERRAUD

That level of intimacy is rooted in the garden walk. There is a world of difference between those who talk about “The Man Upstairs” and those who can say, “I walked and talked with God this morning.”

Bishop James K. Mathews began his ministry in the Methodist church as a missionary in India, where he met Eunice Jones, the daughter of E. Stanley Jones, whom some have called the greatest missionary since St. Paul. Bishop Mathews and Eunice were married for seventy years, and he became a confidant of his father-in-law. When Stanley Jones died in

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By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; . . . before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

HEBREWS 11:5

India in 1973, Bishop Mathews was asked if anyone was with him at the end. He replied, “When last seen, Stanley was walking with God, and then God took him.”²⁶

I call the walk with God the “Great Walk.” The Great Walk is not a walk to work. It’s a walk in the park, a march to Zion, a walk on the wild side. In the words of G. K. Chesterton, “The more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild.”²⁷

The Great Walk is a dance to the “music of the spheres.” Teresa of Avila, a designated “doctor of the church,” refused to refer to disciples as “working for God” or being “used by God.” She deemed those words inappropriate and presumptive. Teresa’s preferred metaphor for walking with God was

“casting flowers,” as children cast flowers to the crowds in a parade. Our mission in life, she said, is to “cast flowers” before God, and in so doing, “to give pleasure to Jesus.”²⁸

How do we engage with God in a way that is pleasing to our Creator? How do we “walk with God” in the garden? I like to call it Godplay. This book is about how to engage in Godplay in every age of life.

Living a “well-played” life means experiencing the fullness of joy that comes from being in deep with the divine,

cleaving close to the covenant, living in sync with the Spirit, and yoked to Christ to the point of surrendered trust in God’s providences and promises. As in the case of Israel, God’s choice of us as “God’s people” precedes any

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You received from us how you ought to walk and to please God.

PAUL THE APOSTLE

obedience on our part. But out of our relational joy in loving God, we find ourselves obedient.

To engage with God in Godplay is to keep the covenant healthy and holy, which is the secret sauce of happiness. Godplay doesn’t wield the power of celebrity or strive to become a “winner” or “star” or “champion.” Godplay is not to “win with Jesus” or even to “be somebody with Jesus.” Godplay is to pick up a cross, which is more blessing than burden, and follow Jesus.²⁹ The recipe for a happy life is one that doesn’t make happiness paramount, but playfulness.

The Holy Spirit is the presence of Godplay in the world. The Holy Spirit is what turns the Bible from words on a page to the very voice of God speaking. God’s Spirit is not “at

work” in the world or the Bible. God’s Spirit is “at play” in the world and the Bible. The Spirit’s playful presence, reveling in God’s “very good” of Creation, is found in art, music, liturgy, literature . . . all of which tune our hearts to sing God’s praise. Evangelism is playing the music of Jesus, helping others to hear and claim the music playing inside them, and inviting others to play and sing together. Or as Kiki Dee once put it, “I’ve Got the Music in Me.”

If humanity needed Protestantism to show it how to *work*, humanity now needs Godplay to teach it how to play. Godplay restores Jesus’ original words, “Come unto me, you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you . . . refreshment.”³⁰ We now know that Jesus himself was less a “working man” than an artisan (*tekton*) who created by artistic means. Perhaps the production of a perfect furrow in a plowed field, or the setting of a flat row of stones before placing the next course, is an artistic achievement.

Godplay is a fundamental approach to life, based not on work and worry but on the biblical warranty that a loving reality called God is inviting us to skip and dance all the way home. The march to Zion is not unremitting toil and travail, but a dance of Shabbat and Shalom by which we “enter into the joy of your lord.”³¹

The time is *now* for “good soldiers of Jesus Christ” to desert as “soldiers in the army of the upright,”³² where the only way we can keep pace in our daily march to the battles of the workplace is through amphetamines, antidepressants, antacids, alcohol, acetaminophen, and so forth. God did not put us here to sacrifice at the altars of a deranged marketism, to earn/

turn in taxes/and burn, to pour out our lives on assignments into which we cannot pour out our hearts. God did not put us here to work like beavers. God put us here to play like otters.

Christians don't work toward the pleasure and acceptance of God. We live from it and play in it. Anytime we approach life with the joy of a child, it is Godplay. Anytime we praise and worship God, it is Godplay. Anytime missional living ramifies relationally in an incarnational way, it is Godplay. The sync of a missional, relational, and incarnational life brings instantaneous and spontaneous joy: Godplay.³³ The world doesn't need more work and more workers, but more play, more God, more Godplay and Godplayers.

What does Godplay look like? How do we become more attuned to playing with God? Godplay lasts a lifetime but can

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look different at different times in our lives. How we engage in Godplay depends in part on our "age." Not our physical age—though our physical age also suggests different forms of play—but our discipleship "age," which

*If work really were such a good thing,
then the rich would surely have found
a way to keep it for themselves.*

HAITIAN PROVERB

brings to the fore not only age-related behaviors but age-important questions about play and how we play out our lives with God and others.

Humans are not without resources for dividing life into periods and cycles. The most enduring, perhaps, are the generational divisions. Aboriginal peoples made decisions based on a "seven generation" rule: Project the impact of an action

on the seventh generation and decide accordingly. The longevity revolution has complicated the seven generation rule because it might soon be possible to have almost seven generations living side by side.

The psalmist thought in generational terms as well: “God’s faithfulness endures from generation to generation.”³⁴ Notice he did not carve up life “from decade to decade” or “from century to century” or “from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.” In fact, we don’t have the word *teenager* in the English lexicon until 1673, and “decades of life” distinctions don’t appear until the last third of the nineteenth century.³⁵

In 2002, the president of Turkmenistan issued an edict that divided life into nine twelve-year cycles. Saparmurat Niyazov’s decree, published in the national newspaper, *Neutral Turkmenistan*, ended childhood at twelve and extended adolescence to twenty-five. Turkmen “youth,” he ruled, will henceforth be between twenty-five and thirty-seven, while those between thirty-seven and forty-nine are “mature.” The next twelve-year cycles are labeled *prophetic*, *inspirational*, and *wise*. Old age begins at eighty-five, while Turkmen who reach age ninety-seven enter a period named for Oguz Khan, considered the founder of the Turkmen nation, who died at 109. Widely mocked after it was first announced, and as arbitrary as the wind blows, this periodization may have been one of the most creative and relevant approaches to aging ever broached.

I have argued elsewhere that, after the boomer generation, generational cultures analysis no longer works in a world where change is exponential, not incremental.³⁶ But we need some way of talking about the human life cycle. Next oldest

to the generational cultures division of humanity is the “ages of man” thinking, which divides the course of life into three, four, six, and seven stages.³⁷ Psychologists typically divide life into five seasons: infancy, childhood, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood.

In recent decades, however, new interest in the phenomenon of delayed aging and a longer life span has revolutionized the way we think about our lives. Cambridge demographic historian and sociologist Peter Laslett argues for four “ages” of life based on four sets of life questions.³⁸ In the first age, the age of preparation, the questions are, “What will I learn?” “Who am I?” “How will I fit into the world?” In the second age, the age of achievement and acquisition, the questions are, “What will I achieve in the external world?” “What is my identity?” “What is my purpose?” The questions of the third age, the age of self-fulfillment, are, “What makes me happy?” “How can I fulfill myself?” “How do I self-actualize myself in my life?” “How do I grow to my full potential?” The fourth age, or the age of completion, is a time of entering fully into the stage of life that descends into a well-prepared death.³⁹ British business guru Charles Handy, from the London Business School, presents these four ages as well in using human resources to maximize the political and economic challenges of society.⁴⁰

Long before Laslett and Handy, a Black Forest wood-carver from Brienz, named Johann Huggler, carved a sculpture called “The Three Ages of Man” that some say is his greatest masterpiece. Unlike Titian’s “Three Ages of Man,” in which the Third Ager is shown hunched over holding skulls and contemplating death, Huggler’s Third Ager is vital and moving.

In establishing a framework for our understanding of Godplay, at first I re-architected the way we live into three ages, similar to Peter Laslett's first three.



I realized that all the experiences I have had—as daughter, student, youthful radical, reporter, battler for women's rights, wife, mother, grandmother, teacher, leader, friend, and lover, confronting real and phantom enemies and dangers, the terrors of divorce and my own denial of age—all of it, mistakes, triumphs, battles lost and won, and moments of despair and exultation, is part of me now. I am myself at this age. It took me all these years to put the missing pieces together, to confront my own age in terms of integrity and generativity, moving into the unknown future with a comfort now, instead of being stuck in the past. I have never felt so free.

BETTY FRIEDAN

The question of the First Age (0–30) is “Where do you go to school?” We are now told that, for males, twenty-six—not eighteen—is the new age of “adulthood.” But remember: Not that long ago, during the Second World War, twenty-year-old pilots flew the planes that won the war; it was twenty-year-olds whom we entrusted with our best technology to battle the German night fighters. Our parents and grandparents saved the world at the same age today's college students are saving beer cans.

The question of the Second Age (30–60) is, “Where do

you work?” or “What do you do for a living?” In this configuration, these “middle years” are the most fulfilling years of one’s life. Carol Shields, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Canadian novelist, put this view succinctly: “There might not be happy endings. . . . I believe in happy middles.”⁴¹

The question of the Third Age (60–90) is, “Where did you retire?” The wellness of the first two ages devolves into the worseness of the last age.

This book argues that, for the Christian disciple engaging in Godplay, the questions for those ages change dramatically from the demographic ones.⁴²

In the First Age of life (0–30), the questions are, “How do I learn to live in God’s pleasure?” and “How do I learn to play in my relationship with God?”

In the Second Age of life (30–60), the questions become, “How can I retain or regain my sense of play amidst the complexities of my life?” “How can my relationship with God help me find joy in my relationships with family, church, community, and creation?” “How can I become a ‘real’ player in a culture of FEAR (false expectations and assumptions of what’s real)?”

In the Third Age of life (60–90), the questions become, “How can I become a master player and world changer?” “How can I be a coach to others in Godplay?” “How can I be a healing presence for Christ in the world?” Third Agers are not called to save the world. But Third Agers are called to show the world the way in which it can be saved.

These “ages” are not meant to pose sequential and consecutive questions, but simultaneous and concurrent ones.

With each of these God-pleasing ages, the life cycles are not necessarily consecutive but cumulative, and they are more simultaneous than sequential. You can have a 1947 model body and be thirty physically, one hundred intellectually, and three spiritually. In other words, preparedness and practicing are not limited to the First Age.

If we ever graduate from the First Age, we stop listening and learning how to toy and tinker and to think like a child. If we ever graduate from the Second Age, we stop living out the gospel in “real time.” If we ever graduate from the Third Age, we stop living in the anointing of mission, in season and out. Ideally, though, we would take the core of each age into the next age and not stop listening and learning and tinkering, living out the gospel, and living in our anointing.

Unlike Laslett and Handy, I end my discussion at the Third Age. Godplayers continue their pilgrimage in sanctification until glorification, the moment of our physical death.

A pilgrimage, by definition, is a journey of transformation; we are never the same at the end as we were at the beginning. For Third Age pilgrims, there is no “retirement,” no “age of completion,” only excitement for every moment of the future, both during this life and in the next. After all, once God has called us into ministry, does God ever call us out of it? Do we retire from the covenant we entered into? Do we retire from marriage? Billy Graham is famous for saying, “Name me someone in the Bible who ‘retired.’” In the words of the apostle Paul, “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”⁴³

The gift of increased longevity represents a big and permanent shift in human life—one that may require a new way

of thinking about the course of our lives. A productive Third Age is still a very new concept in our society. It is definitely a new concept in the church, a designation that we've never before had to think about the way we do now. But I believe that a new view of aging has the potential to profoundly change the church and change the world.

In the past, for many people, the question of the Third Age has been, "Where did you retire?" or "Where are your golf clubs?" We used to think of the "Third Age" as the age of "retirement," the comparatively brief period of time between work and death, wherein, if we're lucky, we can still travel a bit; enjoy sitting on the porch watching the world go by; and maybe do a few things we've always wanted to do—such as play with the grandchildren—before illness sets in and our lives revolve around doctors' offices and hospital visits.

In fact, throughout most of human history, a "third age" was set aside for only the fortunate few. In the second half

of the twentieth century, many USAmericans began to do everything possible to store up funds that would allow them to "retire early"—meaning at fifty-five or sixty, instead of the usual sixty-five. Thanks to revolutionary advances in health care, medi-

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*They want somebody to tell 'em
they have a chance at the i-n-g of
life and not just the e-d.*

TOM ROBBINS, *JITTERBUG PERFUME*

cal technology, pharmaceuticals, genetics, wellness programs, organic foods, nanotechnology, and robotics, to name but a few, it has now become possible, in the twenty-first century, to enjoy an almost Methusalean life span.

Perhaps we should speak of the “younging” of our churches more than their “aging.” We now have a Third Age spanning as many years as or more than the first two-thirds of most of history. When we covenant in baptism to “walk with God” as twenty-first-century disciples, for example, we are making an eternal commitment with century-long legs (ditto our til-death-do-us-part marriage partners).

We suddenly find ourselves reeling from the realization that the new Third Age is not a mere five years or so, but possibly thirty, forty, or fifty-plus years. So what do we do with that Third Age when those years might become the best years of our lives? When rock star Elton John was asked what growing older meant to him, he spoke for most aging boomers when he replied, “I still want to make music, but I don’t want to look like Donald Duck while I’m doing it.”⁴⁴ What should disciples of Christ do with an entirely new third-of-life span?

Nothing stinks up the heavens and shuts down the church quite like indolence. *Sloth* is any time or any age when Christians settle into a state of soul in which they expect to live the remainder of their days just about where they are now, doing what they’re now doing, without going beyond their present experience and the possibility of any dramatic changes or growth spurts. When a soul lives off the faded splendors of the past, it is sinking into itself and not rising to God’s occasions.

Have you considered the possibilities? Has the church? The question now at age sixty is not, “Where should I start on my bucket list?” or, “How do I best set things in order?” or, “Where do I rock?” but, “What should I do with the best years of my life?” “How can my life be pleasing to God during this

Third Age?” “How can I live in God’s grace and pleasure?” “How can I honor this unexpected gift?” “What does Godplay mean in terms of eighty to one-hundred-plus years of life?”

An expanding life span requires a fresh way of looking at what it means to live within the pleasure of God and drink deeply of God’s well of pleasure.

If you have kids, do you think of them as twenty-second-century children? Apart from my mother, Mabel Boggs Sweet, the person who had the greatest influence on me was Dayton

environmentalist, philanthropist, and gardener Marie Aull, whose life span touched three centuries. Marie was born in the nineteenth century (1897) and died in the twenty-first

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*God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday—
a kiss here and a laugh again, and
sometimes tears.*

PATRICK KAVANAGH, “THE GREAT HUNGER”

century (2002). Our twenty-second-century kids, who were born in the 1990s or later, stand a good chance, statistically, of living well into the 2100s—“Lord willing, Jesus tarrying, creek not rising, Moses not prohibiting,” as my Appalachian gramma used to say.

This dramatic expansion of life span has been relatively recent. Whereas in the 1890s, the average life expectancy for a male was thirty-seven, by the 1990s it had doubled, and now it’s even higher, into the mid-eighties. Research published in the 2013 edition of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* proposes that, in terms of demographic equivalency, seventy-two is the new thirty.⁴⁵ Tell someone

in their forties today that they're in "middle age" and you're likely to get smacked in the face.⁴⁶

England's royal family has a tradition of sending out birthday greetings when subjects reach one hundred. In 1916, King George V sent out seventeen. Queen Elizabeth II sent out 255 telegrams in 1952. In 1996, that number was 5,281. In 2007, the number of cards sent was 8,439. In fact, in 2007, 770 people received messages for 105th birthdays and above. The fastest growing segment of the US population percentage-wise are centenarians (one hundred-plus), who are now so numerous, there is a debate among gerontologists as to whether a new category of "super-centenarians" should be created for those over 105, or over 110. Fifty percent of all baby boomers (those born between 1945 and 1972) will live healthy lives beyond one hundred, which has enormous economic consequences since this is the "pig-in-the-python" population that plummeted two centuries of hard work, high accomplishment, and heavy sacrifice into a sinkhole of debt in less than two decades.⁴⁷

If you are reading this in your forties or fifties, you'd be in your dotage if you lived one hundred years ago, when old age was the privilege of wine and cheese. Today, those of you who are forty-five or fifty can expect to keep blowing out birthday candles for another forty years, with a less hardy body but still hale. Thirty-five million US Americans are now over age sixty-five; in thirty years, that number will double to seventy million.⁴⁸ In 1982, the average age of an

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*Be yourself; everyone else
is already taken.*

OSCAR WILDE

elderly person entering a nursing home was sixty-five. Today that age is eighty-three. More than half of those between sixty-five and seventy-four think of themselves as “middle-aged” or “young,” as do a third of those over seventy-five.⁴⁹ When the words are changed to “midlife” or “mid-youth,” the numbers go even higher. No doubt about it: People are living “younger” longer.

It is astonishing that most scholars have not applied the discipline of historical context to the first century in this respect. We’ve been led to think anachronistically of a thirty-year-old Jesus as a “young and fearless prophet.”⁵⁰ In fact, Jesus’ world-changing ministry took place in the first-century equivalent of our Third Age. A more accurate anachronism (if there is such a thing) would be this: In first-century Palestine, First Agers were from one to twelve years old; Second Agers were twelve to thirty; Third Agers were thirty to forty-plus. Life expectancy for males varied from twenty-six (at birth) to fortyish (if you lived to the age of five). In ancient Rome, less than 5 percent of the population survived past sixty.⁵¹ In sum, it’s not true that almost no one survived to “old age” until the recent past. But people aged earlier, and were “older” longer.

The honoring of an “ancient of days” and “elder sage” in Jewish circles started at age forty, but you were not “aged” enough to take on disciples, or “seasoned” enough to start teaching, until you reached the ripe age of thirty, the precise age at which Jesus launched his peripatetic seminary.

Although we don’t know much about his youth, we do know that Jesus spent his First Age years engaged in learning about God, his Father. In his Second Age, we suspect, he

spent his time preparing for his “real” mission and practicing both his scriptural prowess and his craft as a builder or *tekton* (a craftsman, perhaps, of both buildings *and* parables). And in three dynamic Third Age years, Jesus made the greatest mark on the world of anyone in history.

At thirty, Jesus was in the prime of his life. But “prime” meant something closer to our sixty than our thirty. In other words, when Jesus was the equivalent of our “retirement age,” he set out on a journey to save the world.

As massive numbers of baby boomers age into an expansive and explosive Third Age, the need for some theological reflection rises to the fore: How can we make the most of this new third-plus of our lives stretching out before us? How can this Third Age be a time when we rock the planet and not just rock on the porch? How can our Third Age years of highest creativity and activity be meaningful and significant? Some studies have shown that human creativity doesn’t plateau until age eighty-three, when it begins to level off and then slope downward. Other surveys indicate that happiness peaks at eighty-five—in other words, you get happier and happier the older you get. So much for old age as “the unhappy hour.” The Third Age is life’s true “happy hour”—the perfect age somewhere between old enough to know better and young enough not to care.

The Third Age challenges us to rethink John Donne’s image of old age as lowering our sails as we drift into harbor. The new Third Age is not a struggle to find meaning in our lives amid the frost and blight of winter, but a thrilling challenge to find ways to use the tremendous energy, acumen,

and time stretching before us in creative and free ways that feel like play and fun!

But reimagining the Third Age is not just a Third Age question. Nor is it simply a personal and individual question. It is a key question for everyone in this handover from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century, and this handover from a Gutenberg Christianity to a TGIF (Twitter Google Instagram Facebook) Christianity.

What can this transition mean for twenty-first-century discipleship? How can our lives be most pleasing to God in

every life cycle, from first cry to last breath? How can we take a fresh look at what this extra time might mean in terms of an entire life span of living in and at the pleasure of God? How can we make our lives playful and joyful while in a missional mode? In fact, what

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*I will praise You, for I am fearfully
and wonderfully made;
Marvelous are Your works,
And that my soul knows very well.*

PSALM 139:14-15, NKJV

does “taking the gospel into the world,” or as I like to reframe it, “joining Jesus in what he’s already doing,”⁵² look like in a first, second, and third age? While answering these questions, we need to keep as the primary focus of each phase of life the witness and “withness”⁵³ of Jesus, the one who can show us how to live a life of abundance and abidance “pleasing” to God. Jesus elaborated a theology of abundance, an abundance not measured in dollars and cents but in the deepest hungers of the human heart.

In every age of life, what is your “saving grace” that allows

you to be in mission with Christ—to engage in Godplay as a learner, a real player, a master player, and a game changer in a difficult and dangerous world?

What are our Third Agers doing to join Jesus in saving the world? What are all Agers doing to prepare disciples to reach this level of maturity in fire-breathing, Pentecostal faith in Christ? What is being done to empower and encourage all Agers to mentor others in how to *be* beauty, truth, and goodness in person? How do we teach all followers of Jesus to live life as a Sabbath gift—to play with God in the Garden? What does it mean to please God with our hearts, minds, and spirits in every age of our lives? What does it mean to engage in Godplay in each age of life?

In the First Age, pleasing God becomes an embedded posture that bears fruit in every phase of life. In the First Age, what pleases God is our taking the time to toy and tinker with life, learning Jesus “by heart” and our part in his mission in the world, and playing in the dirt and makeshift art of that native clay. Our soul is only the clay; it must be shaped into something, or it remains “globulus” and not art. It is the church’s responsibility to help people climb inside the story, make the story their own, and live the story. A story or metaphor, charged by the Spirit, buries itself and takes root in the soul, where it grows, blooms, and bears fruit throughout life’s mission.

If you know your mission in life, then what other people have and do and say about you does not matter. But if you



*Let us go forth with fear and
courage and rage to save the world.*

GRACE PALEY

have no mission, or don't know your mission, then what other people have and do and say about you matters a great deal.

In the Second Age, what pleases God is participation—in our calling and chosenness, in our community of followers, in our walk with Christ. The Second Age is a time to “get real” about our vocation and our faith, best done through education as enchantment, and to start “rocking” the world with our story. It's a time to relearn how to play, how to get down and dirty, and how to start singing in a confident and powerful voice the song God made us to be. It's a time to play hard and dream big. We have all been “called” to live out our gifts. The quality of our participation in God's calling for our lives and our chosenness for ministry and mission are the defining Godplay of the Second Age.

In the Third Age, what pleases God is the maturing of our lives to the “full stature of Christ,”⁵⁴ wherein we take pleasure in bearing the fruit that pleases God most. It is the time of our greatest freedom—freedom from the fear of others' judgments as well as our own attempts to manipulate them.⁵⁵ Note how the landscape of winter reveals the shape of things better than any other season. Everything in winter becomes so much clearer: our trees, our shrubs, our lives. The winter of life reveals the true shape of the soul.

But maturing doesn't mean we stop playing. On the contrary, it means we have the savvy and *sprezzatura* to be game changers!⁵⁶ In other words, the Third Age is the best age of our lives. Godplay is our pleasure in the walk that charts new paths, cuts new valleys, grows new trees, and isn't afraid



*Bless to me, O God, the earth beneath my foot,
 Bless to me, O God, the path whereon I go;
 Bless to me, O God, the thing of my desire;
 Thou ever-more of ever-more,
 Bless thou to me my rest.
 Bless to me the thing whereon is set my mind,
 Bless to me the thing whereon is set my love;
 Bless to me the thing whereon is set my hope;
 O thou King of kings,
 Bless thou to me mine eye!
 As thou wast before at my life's beginning,
 Be thou so again
 At my journey's end.
 As thou wast besides at my soul's shaping,
 Father, be thou too at my journey's close.
 Be with me at each time, lying down and arising,
 Be with me in sleep, companioned by dear ones. Amen.⁵⁷*

ANCIENT CELTIC PRAYER

to play the field. If you are not leaving life with the sense of unfinished business, then your “business” was too paltry and puny to begin with.

There is an old story of a hardened crusader accepting a bet from another soldier who insisted that it was impossible for him to carry a flame from the Church of the Holy

Sepulchre in Jerusalem back to Paris. On the reverse pilgrimage from Jerusalem to Paris, he had to guard the flame from robbers and storms and stumbles and other vicissitudes of life. But in the process of living with the flame and becoming its protector, his heart was changed from a calloused soldier's heart to a gentle, sensitive, compassionate soul. His whole desire changed—from winning the bet to protecting the flame. By the time he arrived in Paris, no one who had known him before recognized him. He was a totally changed person. As the legend goes, he arrived on Holy Saturday, and it was his flame that lit the paschal fire that year.

In the Third Age, the fire of the gospel is in the hands of master players and marquee mentors who can teach others how to play well, not as players of their own game, but as players of God's Great Game of Life. The Third Age is when we can finally "master" moving from the world's "work" paradigm to a more biblical "play" paradigm, where true artistry and creativity is born. The end of human existence, the ultimate meaning of life, the secret to happiness, is found in two words we have cast asunder that were meant to be joined together: *God+play*.

In every age of our lives, we need to tap from deep within the sense of God's gift of *play*—the consciousness that in every part of life, everywhere we look, in everything we do, we can experience God's pleasure. When our lives become Godplay, we can hear echoing in ourselves the assuring words Jesus heard at the Jordan River: "You are my beloved. You bring me great pleasure."⁵⁸

Life is not work. Life is play.

PART I

Playing Is Not Just for Children

THE WORLD IS MY GARDEN

“THEY HEARD THE LORD GOD walking in the garden in the dew of the day. And the man and the woman hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amidst the trees of the garden.

“Then the Lord God called to the human, ‘Where are you, Adam?’

“I’m hiding.”¹

Adam and Eve played hide-and-seek in the Garden with a God who does not lie hidden, a God who can be seen and heard, talked to and walked with. Hide-and-seek is not the game we were created to play. If anything, God is the seeker and we are the hiders.² “Seeker-sensitive” worship was rightly named, but wrongly focused on the human rather than the divine.³ We don’t need to travel to find Christ. Christ has already traveled to find us. God is not the one whose back is turned. It is we who, for whatever reason, get our backs up or don’t turn back to God.

Humans were designed to walk and play with God in

the Garden without shame, reveling in the joy of Godplay. In freedom's Fall, we exchanged a play paradigm for a work paradigm. But if we are to live as we were created to, bearing the image of God, we must seek to return to the art of play. Humankind was created to live a Garden life. We were made to play with God the game of "tending and tilling the soil," or as I prefer to title it in the game of life, "conserving and conceiving" our relationships with God, each other (*nigh-boor* is "the person who tills the patch of ground next to ours"), and the world. Unfortunately, too often we have turned the Garden game of "conserve and conceive" into a gambling addiction called "consume and casino."

Jesus, the second Adam, came to replace the game of hide-and-seek with a new game—"to seek and to save the lost"⁴—and to lead us back into our natural Garden habit(at) of playing with God. Jesus calls to us with the "shepherd's voice." When we hear the Good Shepherd's voice and follow it, we find our way back into the welcoming and forgiving arms of God, who beckons us into the place of joy and intimacy we long left behind. God's Garden is play-full not work-full. To please God is to embrace not the world's work fetish, but the Garden's playground. If faith isn't fun, we're working for God rather than playing with God. Instead of a Protestant work ethic,⁵ we need a Paradise play ethic. In one of the greatest ironies in Christian history, the Protestant work ethic did more to support "works righteousness" than almost anything ever invented by the Roman Catholic Church.

The Spirit does not stir our hearts to produce *works* so

much as to produce *faith*, *hope*, and *love* within us. God is not interested in showing the world how we can work, but in how we can love and laud the gift of life, how we can laud the One who is Life. The mark of the early church was not, “See how well they work!” but, “See how well they love!” The prevalence of love signals the presence of play. When faith becomes all about *beliefs* and *works* instead of *relationships*, then what we’re really in love with is our own thoughts and opinions and doings—not an image of God, but an image of ourselves.

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The only purpose in life is the search for God.

TIMOTHY LEARY

A play ethic does not suppress or deny the hardness of life, nor is it a flight into the arms of cheap grace. Rather, playing with God is the ultimate act of faith in God’s promises and hope in God’s providences to bring about a dynamic present and an even better future. To trust God in order to *get* something is not faith, but self-interest. Faith is trusting God because of who God is—trusting God when there is nothing to get, when everything is gone, when only God is left. Playing with God frees our faith to trust, to receive the gifts of life, and to advance joy for all people.

Another reason why we need to move to a play ethic and away from a work ethic is that the victory has already been won, on the cross. That means, as Watchman Nee pointed out long ago, we spend too much time fighting *for* victory when we should be fighting *from* or *on the basis of* victory. There is no need to fuss and fret, despair and fear. We play

on a field on which Jesus has already won our freedom. Our “labor” is part of the deceptive work of Satan, who wants us to believe that the outcome has yet to be determined. We are players in a game in which every move counts, but we have no need to count every move because we can count instead on the Prime Mover, the true Master Player.

Jesus found his security in God’s love and favor. We can too. But, too often, we instead seek security in the desires and tangibles of the world: wealth, status, and public praise.

It’s easy to get lost when we’re working our way through life. A *work ethic* urges us to “go it alone,” to fight our way through, to set out toward mirages of self-made glory—superficial paths of sheen and shimmer—in order to get where we want to go. A *work ethic* causes us to be competitive and to try to lead our own posse.

By contrast, the best *play* is never a solo act. The best children’s games don’t need anything more than companionship and a bit of mud and sticks. Play is a grassroots endeavor. Play gets us back to who we are. (Don’t you feel more yourself just thinking about it?) And play gets fun when we acknowledge that we are not playing at life alone.

The children’s game Marco Polo is a wonderful metaphor for the explorative and adventurous journey we take through life when we follow Jesus’ lead. We listen for the Master’s voice calling, “Where are you?” and we follow that voice until it leads us home. There are various explanations of how the game Marco Polo evolved. Some say it was inspired from a real-life occurrence in the master explorer’s life.

The game Marco Polo historically refers to the time when the explorer Marco Polo (then age seventeen) was exploring the region of China with his father and uncle. They were traveling to China in order to see the Khan. Marco grew very exhausted during their travels and fell asleep on his horse one day. His horse sensed this and dropped back from the traveling caravan within the nation. When Marco woke up and did not see his family, he began to hear voices within the desert and thought that it was his family searching for him and calling his name, “Marco.” Because of this, he began to respond to those cries with “Polo.” It turned out that Marco Polo was actually hallucinating and they were not calling him, even though he was later found by his family.⁶

Others see the game merely as a later creative adaptation of the explorer’s quest:

Many people thought Polo’s explorations would yield nothing, and just be a wild goose chase. Therefore, the game where you blindly stumble along (sail) in an area of water (the oceans he sailed), looking for things (people, in the game) to get you out of trouble (being Marco) would naturally be named after him. . . . At the end of the game, you find someone to get you out of being Marco, and Marco Polo found . . . people to get him out of the

debt he would have been in if he [hadn't] brought home riches and valuable knowledge.⁷

No matter which story is true, the truth is in the story. Games are ways we deal with the difficulties in life. Games can also be ways that we find our way back to our beginnings.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her posthumous masterpiece, *Thinking in Circles*, discovered that ancient writings such as the Hebrew Scriptures were written not in linear sequences, but in circuitry. You start at the beginning, and end back at the beginning, but not the beginning where you began. You end at a new beginning, where you have grown and matured, discovered something new, and found something newly valued. For us as humans, God is our “never-ending” story. And our whole lives are spent searching to

get back to that Garden home with God after spits and spurts at guerrilla gardening east of Eden.

In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the 1900 story by L. Frank Baum, Dorothy leaves home only to discover, after multiple adventures, that everything good and

beautiful was already there in her own backyard. Her true promised land was not the glitz and glitter of Oz, but the relationships with loved ones she had left and had always known. The world where she belonged was lost and then found.

Our “backyard” is the Garden of God, which stretches through all of creation. When we start our pilgrimage and

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You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.

PLATO

stay on the Garden path until the end, we don't find God by going "somewhere else," but by discovering anew the beauty of the God who is already there, in/with/among us, and inviting us to play. If our lives hear the summoning Voice to "come and see," then the world is our Garden. God's voice is calling to us from beyond the wilderness: "Come and be with me." But God does not wait for us to come. God comes to each of us. The God who comes to the world is the One who says, "Come to me" but is always coming to us.

In Hebrew culture, throughout history, the Sabbath (Shabbat) is the narrative metaphor for living a still-in-one-peace life filled with God's good pleasure. The combination of the two words *Shabbat* (Sabbath) and *Shalom* (peace) sums up everything that is beautiful about God's design for the created world and for humanity within it. Shabbat Shalom is the Promised Land—a place of total surrender and rest in God, where "all our strivings cease" and where we trust God enough to play out God's purposes in us. To hallow the Sabbath day is to live a hallowed life.

Since when did the Sabbath become synonymous with the self-help culture of health and wellness, mere psychobabble for "taking care of ourselves," "taking time for ourselves," "being good to ourselves," or "nourishing ourselves"? What happened to the Jewish idea of Sabbath, in which one finds delight in God, makes space for grace and worship, both at home and in synagogue, with ritual and food and candles and prayer?

Sabbath *sets aside* time and space for the reverence of God, so that the celebrant may find joy in the beauty of that

relationship and in all relationships.⁸ Even sex is revered on the Sabbath for its covenantal role in pleasing God by pleasuring one's spouse and preserving the marriage covenant. Jesus

healed on the Sabbath because the Sabbath was less about ceasing "work" than about spreading *Shalom*. Perhaps the best meaning of Shabbat Shalom is conveyed not by "Peace be with you," but by "May you be fully healed and whole again, joyful and alive in the arms of God."

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*We live in an ironic society
where even play is turned into
work. But the highest existence
is not work; the highest level of
existence is play.*

CONRAD HYERS

Disciples of John fasted.

Disciples of Jesus feasted. Whose disciples are we? As Timothy Radcliffe notes, "The monastic discipline of fasting was not so much about *not* eating, as being at ease in eating, eating what was put before you, eating together in gratitude, eating no more than your body needs."⁹

Shabbat literally means "ceasing from work or labor." What was meant to be forbidden on the Sabbath were those activities that we would call "work" or "skilled," those things that control and change rather than fit in with God's natural order. It is not best translated as a "day of rest," which connotes cessation of activity. Rather, it is a "day of play"—a day of fun, family, games, sex, praise. It is a festive day, a holy day, a holiday that everyone looks forward to and leans into. It is a time for remembering what God has done, and a foretaste of the messianic age to come. It is the creative space to attend to life's subtleties—what Steve Jobs called "listening

to the whisperings.”¹⁰ Shabbat is celebrated with three festive meals, with sparkling conversation, with music and dance, and with luxuriating in our relationship with God. It is a day that returns us to the Garden.

In a Talmudic legend, the Sabbath does its own version of the Jewish “oy veh!” shtick, moaning and groaning before God about how all the other days of the week were given a mate, except the Sabbath. “Very well,” the Lord is said to have replied, “the Jewish people will be your groom.” The Sabbath and the Jewish people are then united in wedlock, bride and groom, with God as the matchmaker.¹¹

In Jewish tradition, Shabbat is *Kallah*, the bride, and prayers abound with references to the meat, bread, wine, and oil used in the wedding banquet. As one prepares for the bride, so the people prepare for Shabbat. As one longs for the arrival of the bride, so the people yearn for the coming of Shabbat. As the departure of the bride brings sadness, so, too, does the close of Shabbat.

In the Jewish tradition, every instance of life, every moment of existence, is an exercise in holiness. From a Jewish theological standpoint, there is no secular act. There are only activities that we have not yet perceived in all their holiness. *Play* opens up our eyes to the sacredness of the ordinary—to the majestic sanctity of the mundane, the everyday, the common.



*Thank God that there are solid folk
Who water flowers and roll the lawn
And sit and sew and talk and smoke
And snore through all the summer dawn.*

C. S. LEWIS

Jesus enabled us to experience the pleasure of Shabbat Shalom in every part of life. He also let us know that God bestows this gift on all people. We are all chosen, Jews and Gentiles, all beloved, all blessed to receive God's favor and to be made whole and nourished from God's bounty. Whether we can receive this gift depends on our willingness to trust the Holy Spirit. Some see the Spirit as a divine string puller. I see the Holy Spirit as a divine wire cutter—freeing us from the shackles that bind and blind us so that we can live what Mary DeMuth calls the “uncaged life.”¹²

Without the Holy Spirit's bypass surgery on all that blocks life, freedom, and joy in our lives, we cannot experience the pleasure of a life lived in perpetual Shabbat Shalom.