

**Letter from Lost Prairie
Play**

July 7, 2011

Summer is the traditional time for children's release from the demands of a structured environment. It is a time of freedom to explore different worlds: woods, water, books, real or imaginary far off lands. Emily Dickinson says this better than anyone else:

“There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away
Nor any courses like a page
Of prancing poetry.”

One of my favorite childhood books, *A Wind in the Willows*, published by Kenneth Graham in 1908, still haunts me. Anyone who knows this book is likely to quote its most famous line from good natured, poetic Rat to his new found friend Mole “Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.” Perhaps it is why I live on Lake McGregor, swimming, paddling my kayak after work or working out in a single scull.

Graham's vivid animal characters are deeply human in their traits and interactions. Toad is, of course, the most dramatic, exhibitionistic, narcissistic character, whose manic adventures involving car theft and car smashing, have all the verve of out of control adolescence. By contrast dear, sweet Mole is a self-effacing humble yet adventurous creature who opens the book by throwing down his spring cleaning chores to go exploring and later finds himself suddenly deeply homesick for his modest home, “Mole End,” realizing too late “how much it all meant to him, and the special value of some such anchorage in one's existence.” Kindly Mr. Badger epitomizes paternalism and domesticity in an underground haven safe from the menacing dangers of the Wild Wood. Together with Rat and Mole he undertakes to take Toad in hand, “We'll bring him back to reason, by force if need be. We'll make him be a sensible Toad.” Perhaps some will remember the scene where these three friends descend on Toad who is swaggering about in his driving clothes ready to take off in his brand new red motor car - the “Terror of the Highway.” They sit on Toad, strip him of his clothes, and insist on an intervention. Badger delivers a long droning scolding “You bad, troublesome little animal! Are you ashamed of yourself? What do you think your father, my old friend, would have said if he had been here tonight, and had known of all your goings on?” This is punctuated by Toad's sobs and promises to reform and to give up motor cars. Toad's conversion lasts no time at all. He quickly announces that, although he was moved by Badger's eloquence, he has no intention of giving up his habits. The friends then kidnap Toad and lock him up. Toad struggles and then, as the days of confinement go on, becomes depressed, fakes a serious illness and insinuates that he is dying in order to make his escape. In no time at all he is up to his old tricks. He steals a motor car, is arrested by the Police and hauled off to

jail shrieking, praying and protesting until he can plan his escape from jail dressed as a poor washerwoman. Meanwhile Toad Hall has been taken over by a nasty band of stoats and weasels. In the final chapter, “The Return of Ulysses” the four friends stage an elaborate sneak attack to drive out the interlopers and request a fine banquet from Toad to reward their efforts. Toad struggles with his wish to make dramatic self-congratulatory speeches, but finally manages to get his own grandiosity under control and surprises everyone with his modesty. “He was indeed an altered Toad!” and one who goes on to make reparation to all those to whom he had caused distress. I am reminded, reading this book again, that such characters have always existed, similar interventions made and for many changes do take place.

Our current culture does not allow for much play even during childhood. In July 2009 Michael Chabon wrote a piece for the New York Review of Books on the loss of childhood adventure. He noted a significant shift in our idea of childhood so that children have become “cult objects to us, too precious to be risked.” We fear for their safety and ferry them from door to door, never giving them a chance to explore the lands in between. Others, like Dan Kindlon of Harvard, have observed that because we have fewer kids than past generations did, each becomes more precious. We demand more from our children – more companionship, more achievement, more happiness. We begin to blur the boundaries between our own happiness and theirs.

I periodically find myself returning to my early professional life as a child therapist with an abiding interest in the significance play. Almost a hundred years ago now Lili Peller studied with Maria Montessori in London in 1920 and went on at the age of 23 to found the Vienna Montessori School in a working class district, offering day care for 11 hours of the day in the poorest part of the city. This setting was the training ground for my own mentor, Emma Plank, and also for Erik Erikson, all of whom took children’s play seriously. These early childhood teachers attended a group run by Anna Freud in Vienna to instruct them in a psychoanalytic orientation to childhood development and eventually moved to the United States in the wake of WWII. Several of them have written about the importance of unstructured, imaginative and exploratory play in the lives of children. I recently reread a number of essays that Lili Peller wrote on this subject. She reminds us that play is the child’s work, the way in which the child increases his or her awareness, knowledge and skills. It is also the way in which children digest their experience of the world, solve conflicts and assimilate traumatic experiences or narcissistic insults. Play alters the child’s emotional balance, mood, skills, understanding and the range of his or her imagination. At the root of play is the act of turning passive into active, allowing the child to reverse the feeling of being at the mercy of forces that are beyond his or her control and turning helplessness into mastery.

I was intrigued by an article in last December’s year end New Yorker. It told the story of Shigeru Miyamoto, Japan’s most famous inventor of video games best known for his earliest contribution of Super Mario Brothers. Miyamoto is a master of play who consciously tries to recreate his own childhood experience of wonderment in the pull of games. The article opens with a description of Miyamoto’s childhood exploration of a cavern in a bamboo forest near his home and tells us that he continually returned to watch the dance of the shadows on the walls. He took inspiration from this cave and credits his youthful explorations as a source of his aptitude and enthusiasm for inventing and designing video games. The irony that a man who spent his childhood playing outdoors

and grew up to entice children to spend their playtime in front of a video screen is not lost on either Miyamoto or the writer of the article. Certainly the world of play has changed but the need for play has not disappeared. I always love to watch our students rediscovering a sense of playfulness and joy.

So it is in the spirit of summer that we lift the reins, relax the structure and stimulate the senses. We go off to the woods, east, west, south and north to camp and play. This past week I accompanied one of our boys' teams on a three day trip to a forest service cabin, built a century ago in the same year that Wind in the Willows was published, on a lovely bend of the Bull River west of the Cabinet Mountains. The team was functioning well and it was a pleasure to be with them. Several of them had just returned from passes with their parents and were eager to discuss the ins and outs of interactions with their parents with friends as well as in group and individually with members of the treatment team. They recalled their wilderness experiences while hiking through the woods and enjoyed their first experience of catching perch in the Noxon reservoir. They also took time to play – kicking a soccer ball, playing leapfrog, swinging on playground swings, improvising dances and demonstrating the sport of “parkouring.” This French term was new to me and the boys introduced me to their adaptation of free running, jumping and climbing around the natural obstacles in the environment. When they went to gather firewood in the dark red cedar forest they called it Narnia. While it would not be quite accurate to say that all their troubles melted away it was clear to me that they were young, happy and relaxed in this environment and that it seemed to allow them to exult in light heartedness.

Although my days of play are long gone I still find that walking in the woods or paddling on the lake allows me to tune in to my own thoughts, ruminate over my worries, and to let them dissolve in the knowledge that there are matters larger than my own and so to gain perspective. Nature itself is a balm for the troubled mind and play makes light of troubles.

I trust that all of you can find time to enjoy these summer days also.

Warm regards,

Rosemary