



The Magic of Play

a joyful path to liberation

compiled by emma fox

this work is dedicated to all those who love to play, to all the children (of all ages!) i have ever had the honor of learning from, & to all the TRUTH that's activated through this joyful point of entry into deep, transformative antioppression work.

center like a six year old

the following is a practice inspired by the work of Radical Dharma, a movement to transform race as we know it led by Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, & Dr. Jasmine Syedullah. if you are not yet familiar with their work, put down this zine immediately and get in the conversation! visit radicaldharma.org, make a donation, get the book, or attend one of their events.

i translated the centering practice offered in Radical Dharma spaces into a developmentally appropriate format for my preschoolers. i have since found that humans of all ages can get down with this simplified & playful practice, and benefit greatly from this resource for realigning ourselves when we've gone astray from our TRUTH.

before continuing in this zine, pause and take a moment to feel into the child part(s) of yourself. wiggle your body, feel the excited energy of that child, get into character. once they've fully *arrived*... spend a few breaths with each of the following queries:

can you feel your feet?

can you feel your seat?

can you feel how tall you are?

can you feel your left side?

can you feel your right side?

can you feel your back body?

can you feel your front body?

can you feel allllll of the space in between each of those parts of yourself?

now place something inside of that space that really matters to you, that feels really important.

lastly, lift the two corners of your mouth and smile at it!

a note on invoking the inner child

throughout my time in this white, queer, femme, fat body, i have found that the mainstream and dominant understanding of psychological development does not match my felt experience. that is to say, the ways that i both benefit from and suffer under the unholy trinity¹ (white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, + capitalism) have confirmed for me that we are deeply misunderstanding human development for the purpose of maintaining a narrative of HYPER dominance, productivity, & transactional modes of relating. i want to be transparent and state that i do not have any formal education or degrees in developmental psychology and that all of these insights come from my experience (essentially the past 13 years) of working in institutions of ECE (early childhood education). i am sure that i am overlooking models that do not match my critique, and that i likely have gaps in my personal knowledge/experiences that inform this work. my hope is that some of these experiences may resonate with others, and spark a wider conversation about preserving and encouraging the child archetype as an essential part of our individual & collective psyches regardless of our perceived stage of development!

one of the main harmful confusions i've witnessed in the default understanding of development is the assumption that we mature via linear progression. the predominant models maintain that we go through stages, often depicted in numerically or cognitively ranked hierarchies, and once we complete one stage, we graduate and move on to the next. we then assume that we've outgrown those parts of ourselves, and when they are activated it is seen as regression (which more often than not is considered a detriment, and set up in opposition to the positive associations we hold for progression). Erik Erikson's model of development, for instance, is set up entirely through binaries (in infancy, he poses that we develop trust vs. mistrust for example, with a presumed "right" outcome of developing trust), and ranked in stages 1-8. healthy development follows a linear timeframe, where we develop the correct outcome from the stage and graduate to the next. he suggests that we can hop to any of the stages when a traumatic event occurs. here, although holding more nuance and allowing for the nonlinear reality of human development, it is only a painful/traumatic experience that can activate these various stages of development.

it has been my experience, both in my own development as well as in witnessing the development of so many radical children, that we do not outgrow the infant, toddler, child, tween, teen, and so forth. rather, as we develop we gain greater awareness for more and more parts of ourselves. we cultivate a sense of our internal family system² and invite more players onto the stage of our psyches. i did not feel that suddenly little emma was gone once i hit puberty; i experienced a feeling of unlocking a new version of myself, and as i continued to grow i developed more and more skills for acknowledging these newly emerged parts of myself when they want to come out. the infant, the child, the teen and so forth are all still very much present and want to come out and play---not just in the face of trauma & suffering, but when experiencing something beautiful and pleasurable. with this reframe of developmental psychology, we realize the child is actually the oldest part of our psyche, as they are the part that has been with us the longest.

with this understanding, the invitation to tap into the inner child is not an invitation to go backwards on the linear model. it is instead an invitation for those oldest part(s) of yourself to be centered, seen, + celebrated. it is an invitation to access the psychospiritual and cognitive processing of your child self. it is an invitation to remember what it feels like to be in that child's body, mind, + spirit, and to allow them to take center stage and run the show for a bit. it is an invitation to be in choice around when and how that child comes out to play!

1 shoutout to Lilac Maldonado for teaching me this term via Creating Freedom Movements <3

2 IFS (internal family systems) is an approach to psychology that i deeply respect and am learning about every day. most of my understanding of this framework comes from "Parts Work: An Illustrated Guide to Your Inner Life" by Tom Holmes + Lauri Holmes

pause n' play...

use this space to creatively conjure the child part(s) of yourself. write a spell, draw stick figures, put your whole body into some good ol' fashion scribbles. what do they look like, sound like, smell like, feel like?

play as parallel process

getting free from playing pretend

play is the ultimate conduit for rapid psychospiritual cleanup (PSCU), or the necessary transmuting + clearing from one's psyche of the values, patterns, + narratives inherited from systems of oppression. in this context, play refers to any space that activates the imagination, conjuring a sense of curiosity, pleasure, and openness. in this state of activation, we can examine our ingrained patterns with wonder and imagine ourselves existing and behaving outside of our ordinary habits. we can play out archetypes (such as death, the savior, the villain) and understand their felt sense, neruoses, & wisdom without unconsciously imposing these patterns onto others.

play can take on many forms, whether it be a game with shared rules and known boundaries, or my personal favorite, the amorphous space of pretend play, where the rules and dynamics emerge as the play unfolds. there are endless breathtaking, magical, awe-inspiring facets to play that make it a potent practice for detaching ourselves from psychospiritual loops we might be stuck in. for the sake of time/space/energy, i will name a few that feel most relevant here.

Play allows us to build sustainable relationships with each other.

through play, particularly pretend play and the space of making up rules as we go, we get to try on different roles (*actually, right now I am pretending I am an intergalactic being attempting to explain our practices to earthlings, and trying on the role of being an outsider seeking understanding*). we can play out different dynamics, even revisit painful dynamics, with relatively low stakes. the "I don't want to play this any more" choice is a powerful one. we can carve new paths in the relational dynamics that emerge in play, so that we don't have to choose the same outcomes we've experienced in "real" life. we can practice and come into the feelings we want to experience in healthy intimacy and sustainable, mutually consensual relationships. we can say "I don't want to play this anymore" as soon as it's not feeling good, and exercise the muscle of setting boundaries without the usual feared consequences of "what if in saying no to the dynamic i lose the relationship in its entirety." we can experience trust and depth in ways that require adapting to what others are seeing or creating in the pretend world.

Magic is centered and space is transformed through play.

as children, many of us were constantly witnessing the magic of the world(s) around us. we could transform a stick into a wand, a pile of moss into a fairy world, a bunch of rocks into chocolate chips. in some ways, this might further our transactional relationship to the spaces we play in and the resources they hold, where we are seeking to use the objects and space so that they enrich our experience. and, it is often true that we are actually observing the magic that already exists in the space and working with those resources to enliven that magic further. in this both-and scenario, we first use the objects to enrich our play and then discover that they hold sacred magic, power, and we learn to treat them with respect. the water that has healing magic when playing water witch holds that energy truly, and we begin to understand, revere, and respect the spirits of all the beings and resources in our environment. we see, feel, & experience the aspects of our environment that are intentionally hidden from us through forces of oppression.

Play clarifies what activates TRUTH.

the more we play, the more we become aware of the extent to which we are pretending & performing when we participate in systems of oppression. it's as if we are in a game or world where everyone is running a script for a play that frankly sucks. there is a truthful paradox that emerges here; where the pretend play is more real than the reality of our daily lives. the people we are, and the possibilities we create in our play worlds are more in alignment with our whole TRUTH. we start to notice how ridiculous and wild it is that we've bought into the worlds of capitalism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, and so forth. we begin to feel an untenable sense of "i don't want to play this anymore" in spaces that uphold these worlds. for we now have an embodied, felt sense of the worlds in which we can truly be our weird, wild, whole selves.

We can alchemize our realm of possibility through play.

in our play, we can rather quickly detach ourselves from a loop and hop into a new pattern for ourselves. play also allows for the necessary conditions to imagine what comes next; that we don't get stuck in our focus on what's tethering us, how horrible the oppression and trauma that ensues is, but that we can dream up and feel into the systems of care that will allow us to liberate ourselves from that oppression + exist as we are, fully! for example, we can decide we don't want to respond to conflict by attacking the perceived threat, and instead develop a protective superpower that dismantles the conflict altogether (i.e. HATERBLOCKER)¹. this play may carry over into our lives in such a way that we actually stop responding to conflict in attack mode, and work on setting better boundaries and saying no to spaces where we aren't feeling loved in our entirety.

pause n' play...

transform a mundane activity into play!

the next time you need to partake in an "ordinary" task (i.e. participate in that unholy trinity), such as going to the grocery store, assign yourself a pretend mission. if it's helpful for you, imagine the oppressive force (i.e. capitalism at the grocery store) as an evil entity you are encountering on your mission. consider the following prompts to get deeper into your play...

who assigned you this mission?

what do you need to accomplish?

what is the intention and purpose of the mission?

who are you and what is your role in this mission?

what resources/superpowers do you have for accomplishing this mission?

¹ In my play, I've developed a superpower known as HATERBLOCKER that can return any hateful/hexxing energy back to the sender with love, and give them the power to HaterBlock as well.

transmuting the work//play binary

i understand the work of dismantling systems of oppression as fundamentally engaging in a shift away from either/or binary thinking, towards both+and, full complexity, weird wild wholeness. in order to get free from the old/current paradigms (i.e. systems of dominance + oppression), i find it necessary to engage in the transmutation of all binaries. here, transmutation changing one form to another, like alchemy. this is important, because too often we are so ready to change the *content* of our frameworks without doing the work to shift the *form* or system to which we apply that content. a prime example of this is diversity, equity +inclusion trainings, where companies/orgs seek to bring in more inclusive content without having to look at what they are including their staff to, or how their business models and practices are inherently white supremacist + cis-heteropatriarchal.

the work of transmuting binaries is then the work of shifting the form we use in constructing relationships across difference, away from dichotomy towards the liminal, gray area (have you ever felt disturbed by the fact that a primary milestone in early childhood development is a child's ability to name and recognize opposites?). for the purposes of this compilation, it feels most relevant to investigate the extent to which we've learned to cognitively (and psychospiritually) set up work + play in a dichotomous relation. before i get all preachy about how work IS play and play IS work, i invite you to spend some time reflecting on the following questions:

what are the primary associations you have with "work"?

what are the primary associations you have with "play"?

what is the primary relationship you associate between work + play?

what would it look like to invite more play into your work?

what would it look like to invite more work into your play?

congratulations! you have begun transmuting the work//play binary <333

notice how you defined work + play throughout those questions. did they fall into the good/bad binary, with play being good and work bad? did you find yourself frustrated with not enough room to capture the nuances and complexities of your connotations for either or both concepts of work + play? was it easy and/or challenging to separate the two in your reflections?

work IS play + play IS work

as i unravel from the stories i've inherited from the unholy trinity, i notice that this work//play binary runs deep. shame often emerges when experiencing joy in a context where i am being paid or expected to maintain a professional dynamic; anger and resistance often come a-knocking when i feel i have to shift into labor or work in contexts where i came to play. it has been so important to begin seeing how work + play intersect as a means of freeing myself from the "it's not supposed to be like this" and "i'm not allowed" narratives!

remember what i shared earlier about play activating our TRUTH and clarifying for us how we are really "playing pretend" when we participate in the unholy trinity? this understanding has served as a soft point of entry into the both + and of work + play, where i recognize that i am performing and playing a character in some of my working dynamics. from here, i arrived at the appreciation of how much work, particularly emotional and psychospiritual healing, happens when i play. i have since created more spaciousness around my work + play spaces; so much so that i literally "play office" when i work for myself from home (my cat is usually my assistant and i enjoy getting in my business suit). after playing with the children i work with, i often journal or meditate to digest what emerged for me in our play and how i can integrate that into my healing work. at this point, i arrive at the joyous conclusion that work IS play + play IS work!

pause n' play...

get to know your inner business bitch <3

if you played "office" (or school or doctor or any pretend world that replicated the working world really) as a child, what roles did you love to play? what worlds were you creating?

when you are working now (whether for a wage job or emotional + psychospiritual labor), what role + character do you play?

are there similarities between the roles you loved as a child and the roles you fill currently?

if not, how might you bring more of that play into your working dynamics now?

mirror magic!

mirror mirror on the wall... i am the greatest me of all.

this is a practice i've been exploring for the purpose of cultivating a deeper sense of romance, love, + full acceptance of myself. i consider magic the art of tuning into the energies available to us and using that energy to transmute + transform dreams into realities. mirror magic is the practice of using a mirror, or reflective surface of any kind, to manifest your dream relationship with yourself, and transform insecurity + doubt into giggles, abundance, + joy. truthfully, mirror magic can be anything you make it out to be. it can be as simple as pausing for a moment when you catch your reflection to wink and pay yourself a compliment. it can be as complex as setting aside an hour, lighting candles, putting on a sexy outfit, and staring at your reflection until you fall madly in love with what you see. so long as you are evolving in your relationship with yourself with the help of an entrusted, or perhaps enchanted, mirror, you're performing some dope ass mirror magic! below are some suggestions for starting a mirror magic practice of your own...

use the mirror on the next page to draw out the parts of yourself you want to more deeply love + celebrate. what do they look like all loved up + seen?

write out some affirmations (i.e. i am a powerful intergalactic healer) you can tell yourself when you look in the mirror. if you weren't into drawing out your beloved parts, you can use the mirror on the next page to write them out. if you have a dry erase marker, you can add your affirmations to a mirror you'll be working with so they're written out every time you look at yourself!

go to a thrift store + seek out a special, enchanted mirror specifically designated for your mirror magic practice. you can bejewel + bedazzle the mirror as much or as little as you want! just make it feel special, magical, + true to who you are and the version of you that you'll be manifesting.

take it nice + slow. relate to this practice like you might relate to dating, and greet yourself in the mirror as you would greet a lover. pick a time of day that you already know you'll be in front of a mirror, and start by adding just a few minutes of slowing down and noticing something about your reflection that you genuinely are gushing over. tell yourself about why you are gushing, and end this brief time by reciting one or all of your affirmations to yourself.

once you've explored the initial courtship and shorter practices, play with going deeper into the practice with a longer in depth date. prepare your space, intentionally cast a container for your mirror magic in whatever ways you do normally (calling the corners, inviting in ancestors + protectors, maybe just saying "i'm doing this now"), and make it feel special and romantic! once in the space, sit in front of your magic mirror and start by taking slow deep breaths, holding eye contact with your reflection. slowly begin to envision your face shifting, taking your gaze from different focal points. when you feel insecurity or judgment arise, pause and breathe into it. when you feel love + pleasure arise, pause and name it aloud. after a few rounds of this, begin to romance your reflection with your affirmations. at the end of your practice, thank your reflection and journal about what you noticed. track what feels the same and what changes in the ways you connect with yourself in the following days.

take hot mirror selfies and document the process!



