



The play of change

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Abstract

Purpose – Two claims are made about play that bears on managing change in organizations. First, play is a creative dynamic of human community; and in particular, it is the form taken by love at the boundary of fantasy and reality. Second, play is known, not by analysis via the mind and reason, but by intuition via the body and feeling. To manage change as play is to call upon the possibilities of adaptation and development that lie at the creative edge of love.

Design/methodology/approach – The arguments of the paper are not strictly rational (deductive) or empirical (inductive) but are based upon an “abductive” reading of the literatures on play and managing change.

Findings – Play is key in managing change. Play is the creative enlargement of love involved in healthy and effective adaptation and development.

Social implications – Change in organizations is best taken in the spirit of love that is play. As change calls to love, the greatest changes call to the greatest love of the divine in which all things are possible.

Originality/value – The paper offers a novel theoretical integration of the research literatures on play and managing change. The paper offers a powerful argument for the humane foundations of play and change in love.

Keywords Change management, Emotional intelligence, Communities, Social values

Paper type Conceptual paper

What is play? The question was put on fascinating display a number of years ago in a chess match staged between then world-champion, Gary Kasparov, and a computer named “Deep Blue” made by the International Business Machines Company[1]. To the surprise of many, including Kasparov who had never lost a chess match, the computer won the six-game match by a tally of two-one with three draws. News accounts described, the match as a momentous fall. Mankind lost its own supreme test of intelligence to a machine. Most editorials served up a salad of anxiety and defiance. Some said flatly that the contest was silly. Others protested that man was still better than machine. True, the machine could calculate, but it could not think or feel or intuit. In contrast, the editorials written by sophisticates of brain science and technology conceded that a threshold had been crossed and that longstanding distinctions between man and machine are fading. Charles Krauthammer of the *The Weekly Standard* (1997) proclaimed the Turing Test for artificial intelligence passed at last, warning that we have only to wait for our mechanical offspring to surpass us.

Where majority opinion took the side of man in the man vs machine debate, sophisticates took the side of the machine. And, as is so often the case in human affairs, the better wisdom rests with the majority. The affecting lesson of the match was not in the question of whether man or machine is better at chess, but in the question of what it

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is to play. The majority's anxious reaction is well taken, if poorly stated. The terrifying lesson of the match is that intercourse with machines makes us less than what we are. We lose sight of what it is to be human. More important than the glamorized contest of man versus machine is the slow usury of human spirit wasted on machines. Sadly, the lesson drawn by Kasparov himself is just this; that he must become more like a computer (and less like a human) himself:

To beat this machine, I just have to play great chess. I need a comprehensive, bullet-proof opening preparation that checks all sharp lines of play to avoid any flaws – which can be deadly when playing Deep Blue. I need physical and psychological stability, a great level of concentration and a mind free of other distractions to calculate and calculate (*The Guardian*, 1997).

Thus, in an example far from the human ideal, we catch a glimpse of what play is: it is a sharing of life with others. "Play" with a computer is something other than this.

This paper is about what the human sharing of life in play means for thinking about change in organizations. As the editors of this special issue of *Journal of Organizational Change Management* observe, the realm of play – which is commonly identified with a childhood world of fantasy and frivolity – would seem to have little to do with the adult world of serious change in work organizations (Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006). In this paper, I join others in this volume to argue to the contrary, that play has everything to do with change at work. I begin with a review of well-known puzzles of play in order to make two claims about it. My first claim is ontological; that play is the creative dynamic of human community. Arising in community, play is the form that love takes at the boundary between fantasy and reality where new social arrangements arise to take the place of old social arrangements. Even when enacted by individuals alone, play is not about individual persons but is about the whole of the human community. My second claim is epistemological; that play is to know not by analysis via the mind and reason, but by intuition via the body and feeling. In play, we understand human community in a way that reaches beyond natural science. Turning finally to the question of managing change in organizations, I conclude that play is key. Play calls upon the deepest vitality of human community and thereby upon its greatest possibilities for adaptation and development. This is to recall a wisdom long implicit in the literature on managing change – namely, that change is best taken in the spirit of play borne in love; that it is managed best when it is not "managed" but is "played" And this is to recall a wisdom even older and greater – namely, that as change calls to love, the greatest changes call to the greatest love; that of the divine in which all things are possible.

Puzzles of play

Play confounds social science because it is a form of human community rather than a form of individual life. Its puzzles are those of community; particularly of attraction, synchrony, merger, and selflessness. What brings people together in a ball game or story or political struggle? How do players move together in conversation or on the dance floor? Whence the solidarity of ballplayers on a team, or the liminal feeling of "communitas" of religious communicants (Turner, 1974)? And how are players of all kinds able to leave personal troubles behind in selfless play? Looking into these puzzles, we understand play as an expression of human community; that it is a sharing of life in love with others. Looking into these puzzles, we understand that play is not to know in

pieces by analysis but holistically by its feeling. And looking into these puzzles we see at the essay's end the wisdom in play for managing change in organizations.

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Attraction

To the question of what attracts people to one another in play the usual answer is that play is appealing or “fun” (Abramis, 1990) – it is something we like to “join in.” Some explain this appeal by play’s resonant psychology of effectance (White, 1959), intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975), “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1974), or “deep fun” (De Koven, 1978). Others explain this appeal by play’s salutary functions – its benefits for intellectual and social development (Vygotsky, 1933; Erickson, 1950; Piaget, 1962; Bruner, 1974); its role in personal creativity (Amabile, 1996; Isen, 1999; Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006); its reinforcement of crucial behaviors without external reward (Berlyne, 1968); and its self-generating and self-liquidating energies (Koch, 1956). However, as insightful as these ideas are about the personal states and functions of play, by focusing on one or another facet of play and by focusing on the individual person alone they leave the mutuality of its attraction to question that is, why do people play together?

The social attraction of play is a puzzle because we think of it inaptly. We suppose people play for their own reasons or good. We ask what Jack or Jill gets out of play. Or we ask how play helps a child grow up to be an adult. And by taking our answers in the person-centered form of our questions, we do not see what we have missed. We do not think to ask how play expresses a greater life of human community. We do not think to ask how community is manifest in what people feel and do. But if play is as big as the human community, it is no use to ask why individuals play. Individuals do not play; they are played by the greater life in which they are part (Sandelands, 2003). This last is not a new idea, but was described decades ago by Gadamer (2004) who saw as well that play is not a subjective attitude of the individual player, but is the shaped activity of a game played with others. According to Gadamer: “We have seen that play does not have its being in the player’s consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit. The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him (p. 109).” As formulated by his translator, his parallel locution was that: “In play we do not express ourselves, but rather the game itself, presents itself” (p. xiv). Odd to say, the human community “plays” through its members.

Synchrony

Among the spectacles of play, few are more impressive than its synchronies. Players move together in time and space as if choreographed. Of course, when the play happens to be a dance, or a well-structured game, or a strict religious ritual, it may actually be choreographed. But these exceptions prove the rule of concerted movement in daily life – of boys roughhousing on the living room floor, of girls playing school in the bedroom, of women in the kitchen making jam, of their husbands in the den debating an issue of the day. As Huizinga (1950) notes, play’s synchronies pervade culture – they are culture. Common to games, sport, the battle of the sexes, religious rituals, the arts, jurisprudence, conversation, politics, war, and business is a surpassing synchrony that Huizinga calls “cooperative agonism.” Players conspire to contest. They move together to oppose. In a phrase, they compete as good sports. The puzzle of synchrony in play is how it comes to be.

The synchrony of play is difficult to explain in terms of the individuals involved, e.g. by their perceptions, plans, and motives. How, for example, can jazz musicians improvise on the fly to produce a new piece of music that sounds “right”? How can they respond to each other so quickly and so well? We could ask the same of a gang of boys playing basketball in the park, or of a clique of girls giggling their way through a slumber party. Such synchronies only grow in mystery the more nearly one looks into them. Close analyses of even ordinary events – such as a supper conversation with friends – reveals astonishing, anticipations, and coordination (Brothers, 1997). What is surprising about these synchronies is our supposition that they are made by independently oriented and motivated individuals. When we view them instead in the whole of human life, they are less mysterious, though no less wonderful. Then they are not new orders built from the ground up out of individual parts, but are developments of an already existing and already ordered human being. They manifest a communal life that is ever ongoing; a life that began with human history, that flourishes at present, and that will grow into a future. The individuals, we isolate in analysis are members of a larger life. They know how to get along and move together because they have always gotten along and moved together. In each breathes the life of the whole. As the leaves of a great oak tree, they are arranged in time and space and function by having grown up together from a common root.

Merger

If there is one point upon which students of play agree it is that play involves a distinctive and curious experience of merger or “oneness.” Of the many ideas of this experience perhaps the best known is Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975, p. 43) concept of “flow”:

Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. It is kind of feeling after which one nostalgically says: “that was fun,” or “that was enjoyable.” It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future.

Other writers, such as Maslow (1971) and Rogers (1969), pronounce similarly on the distinctive merger of play using terms such as “self-actualization” and “peak experience.” At play, people can be so identified with what they are doing that they become one and the same (self-actualization) and this merger comes to seem a special moment in their lives (a peak experience).

These and other characterizations of merger mark play as an activity apart from others, as an activity with a phenomenology of its own. Koch (1956) notes a sharp contrast between his own experiences, noting on the one hand an awkward and halting self-consciousness, and on the other hand an adept and fluid involvement in activity. Of the former, which he denoted as “State A,” he wrote:

I am distractible, flighty, self-preoccupied, rueful over the course of my life and the value choices it has entailed. I feel depressed, continually drowsy, guilty about my purposelessness and general ineffectiveness. The world is a flaccid structure of neutral tone and value. My responses towards people are bumbling, inert, ineffective, rejective [...] An enormous distance seems to supervene between myself and my most prized values (p. 66).

Of the latter, which he denoted “State B,” he wrote:

Perhaps, one of the most remarkable properties of B is that thoughts relevant to the problem context seem to well up with no apparent effort. They merely present themselves. The spontaneity and fluency of ideation and the freedom from customary blockages seem similar to certain characteristics of the dream or certain states of near dissociation (p. 68).

Thus, the puzzles of merger in play are twofold. One is why play, and not other kinds of activity, is experienced as a merger. The other and related puzzle is how a person goes from ordinary consciousness to the merged consciousness of play and back again. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) answers these puzzles with his theory of optimal experience, whereby flow happens when a person meets a sufficiently challenging activity with sufficiently developed skills. Under these conditions of person and task, he argues, there is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts and irrelevant feelings, and as a result all unhappy self-consciousness disappears. However, while appealingly simple, this explanation is unsatisfying on at least two counts. First, if it were this simple, we should expect people to constantly seek out flow experiences, and to always challenge themselves with activities that optimally test their skills. Yet, we know this is not the case. Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi himself pens book after book aimed to help people live fuller and more flowing lives. We are left to ask what else, besides a person and a challenging task, is required for feelings of flow to occur? Second, and more revealing, this explanation provides no account for the fact, reported by Csikszentmihalyi (1997), that the overwhelming majority of flow activities are not performed alone, but together with other people. For example, when Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) studied teen experiences of happiness, strength, and motivation in daily life, they found them far more common and vivid when teens were in groups with peers than when with their family or when alone. Teens are most unhappy, most weak, and most unmotivated when by themselves. Csikszentmihalyi’s idea of flow is limited by its premise that flow is an individual phenomenon when it is a phenomenon of human community. Again we are returned to the idea that play is a dynamic of social life, a dynamic as big as human being itself. Even when experienced as “flow” and enacted alone for example in solitary activities of rock climbing or novel writing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) – play expresses the life of the community. The “solitude” of the rock climber or novelist is a position taken in the community (often a position deliberately apart from others) and this communal aspect is essential to its very humanity. Again odd to say, given that we see them in isolation, the rock climber and novelist are persons at play, sharing life with others. Their play is not about their person alone, but is about the whole of the human community.

Selflessness

From merger comes play’s most confounding puzzle of selflessness. On the one hand, play is totally consuming and self-possessing. A golfer, deep in the concentrations of the game, plays in a “zone” of peak performance. A stage actor invested in her part becomes the person she plays. Friends drinking and talking surprise themselves with the lateness of the hour. On the other hand, play is selfless. A mountain climber challenged by a steep cliff face leaves his unhappy marriage behind. A concert pianist captivated by the music forgets the stage fright that wobbled her knees a few minutes before. At play, we are somehow fully present and fully un-self-concerned.

Koch (1956) found this alert selflessness a reflection of play's merger of activity and self. Dominated by activity, one becomes that activity:

The central and decisive "mark" of State B is domination of the person by the problem context, or, better, by a certain direction defined by the problem context – a "diffuse" but absolutely compelling direction. All systems of personality seem "polarized" into the behavior; thus the personality is either integrated or, in a special sense, simplified, as you will. In State B, you do not merely "work at" or "on" the task; you have committed yourself to the task, and in some sense you are the task, or vice versa (p. 67).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) makes the same observations about the play he calls flow, noting that:

One item that disappears from awareness deserves special mention, because in normal life we spend so much time thinking about it: our own self (p. 63). [...] The absence of the self from consciousness does not mean that a person in flow has given up control of his psychic energy, or that she is unaware of what happens in her body or in her mind. In fact, the opposite is usually true (p. 64). [...] [This] loss of self-consciousness does not involve a loss of self, and certainly not a loss of consciousness, but rather, only a loss of consciousness of the self. What slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are. [...] Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward (p. 64).

The selflessness about which Koch and Csikszentmihalyi are puzzled is clarified by the communal nature of play. In play, the boundaries that usually isolate one person from another – the identities that distinguish them as individuals – are overcome by the life of community. The person comes alive in play as he or she welcomes the human community into his or her being. This explains the unselfconscious alertness of play – the life of the community takes personal form. This also explains, why play is undone by too much self-concern or ego. When people put their lives ahead of that of the human community, the latter succumbs and play dies.

Unserious seriousness

A final puzzle of play is its paradoxical meaning. Play is at once the most serious thing in the world and it is just a game. Play is serious and frivolous, consequential and immaterial, real and make-believe, hard work, and fun. Although, we think of play as a diversion or amusement, we are most human and most ourselves when we play. The day's *New York Times* newspaper is instructive. Taking the folded paper, we find at its center the stories of sport. These are purest play stories – of fun, concentrated effort, excitement, courage, teamwork, success, and failure. Folded around this core are the more adulterated play stories of business and commerce. These are also stories of fun, effort, excitement, courage, and the rest, but they are told with a salt grain of skepticism about favoritism, ruthlessness, un-sportsmanship, and caprice. These "games" are more serious somehow. Finally, the outermost section of the paper, folded around these other two, are the most corrupt play stories of international politics and war. In them one can hardly make out their play under the weight of a seriousness that ruins or destroys lives. These are stories of life gone mad. It is not superficiality, but its opposite, that leads many people to the sports section before all the others.

The anthropologist Bateson (1955) writes of play's puzzling meaning, noting in play a paradox. In play, acts denote real things, but they do not denote the same things that

those things denote. As he puts it, “The playful nip [of animals play fighting] denotes the bite, but does not denote that which is denoted by the bite.” The playful nip is, somehow, real and unreal at the same time. On one hand, in the big picture, the playful nip is not important (it is unserious). On the other hand, in the play fight, the playful nip is important (it is serious). For humans, this paradoxical meeting of real and unreal is an occasion for creating meaning – an occasion for creating a new reality and a new community. For humans, the shared life of play waits to be born into one reality or another – one we call sport, another business, and still another politics. This is the life, reality, and community that Gary Kasparov could not share with the machine Deep Blue. And this is the life, reality, and community, we share with others in organizations and that we must reckon with in managing change.

Play is the creative dynamic of human community

At last, we come to the ontological question: what is play? To this question the puzzles above bring two ideas. First, play is not about persons but is about the human community. Four of its puzzles – of attraction, synchrony, merger, and selflessness – conjure a transpersonal social whole; a communal life that surpasses and encompasses individual persons. Where there is such a life there is love, the force that holds the human community together (Freud, 1922/1975). This is the idea that play is founded upon love. Second, play is a particular unfolding of human being in which, the life of the community takes shape and meaning. Play’s puzzle of unserious-seriousness conjures a dynamic of creation in which the community comes into new forms, new arrangements. This is the idea that play is a way that love grows and develops.

Taking these two ideas together, play can be defined as the second dynamic or “moment” of social life because it begins in love which is the first dynamic or moment of social life (Sandelands, 2003). Viewed abstractly, love is the dynamic tension between the division and unity of human being. It is simultaneous movement toward unity across differences (e.g. as persons or groups seek to overcome the differences that separate them) and movement toward differentiation within unity (e.g. as persons or groups seek to maintain their identities in their bond). Viewed more concretely, love is to see in the struggles of the young at love (no matter old they may be) to establish that magical oneness that does not deny but rather nourishes their own individual being. Thus, love brings form to human life through its dividing aspect of difference and conflict and through its uniting aspect of similarity and cooperation. Born of love, play is the second moment of social life. It is love’s bloom of creation at the boundary of unseriousness (fantasy) and seriousness (reality) wherein new social arrangements arise to take the place of old social arrangements. The root of play in love is to see in play’s most elementary forms of friendly fight and sexual flirtation (Huizinga, 1950; Pellis and Pellis, 1996) – the one a pretend movement against another in contest (a division in unity), the other a pretend movement toward another in desire (a union in division). The root of play in love is to see also in the origins of the so-called “play face” (by which players of many different species communicate their intention to play) which traces to the rooting reflex in the mother-infant bond (Tomasello and Call, 1997). And the root of play in love is to see in the prominence of play in sexual selection and mating (Burghardt, 2005). It is remarkable and significant that play is most plain in animals in which males compete for sexual access to choosy females, in which males take sexual initiative while honoring female prerogatives, and in which females take

primary care of the young. The basic motifs of play are based on sexual love (on the division and unity of male and female) (Sandelands, 2001). Contest is a figure of male striving for female favor. And fantasy play often takes the lines of female concern for social support, nurture, and sexual attraction.

That the young play more than adults (adult mammals and non-human primates hardly play at all) indicates its primary role in the creation of social life (Bruner, 1974). Play is how immature animals instinctively find their way into the community. Animals at play exhibit proto forms of behavior – mainly of aggression and sexuality – that are then incorporated into communal life. That these social acts are crudely formed and exuberantly expressed indicates their immaturity. If adult animals play less it may be because they are already incorporated in the social life of the stock and because their substantial and demanding social life leaves them little energy, opportunity, and need for play. It is thus instructive to note, what we human adults do when we have nothing particular to do that is, in those rare moments when we have free time and energy. Without thinking about it, we again become children and we again play. We make play faces and galumph (Miller, 1973). We seek out others in a carefree spirit and find ways to wrestle and frolic and befriend. In short, we love needlessly, and superfluously. We are wiser than we know to call this recreation, for that is precisely what it is – in play we “re-create” social life. As we will soon see, this re-creative aspect is what makes our play so important for thinking about change in organizations.

However, despite its phylogeny in mammalian evolution, our play is unique. It transcends animal play in its symbolic aspect that gives it an unprecedented dimension and bearing (Bruner, 1974). Whereas all play expresses love (which, again, is defined as the dynamic tension between social division and unity), our play alone also symbolizes love – that is, it is also an idea or conception of love. Our play is both instance and figure of love’s division and unity. The exaggerated movements and distinctive postures and demeanors of play, that in animals simply express exuberant affection, in us symbolize an activity called “play” and invite others to join in. For us, every instance of play (every game, dance, work of art, ritual, sport, joke, language, and organization) is an idea of community. And for us, the reason to play is not only to take pleasure or to practice a skill for later life, but also to participate in and confirm our human being in community.

Thus, we must question, the supposed similarities between animal play and our own, and thereby the supposed similarities between animal social life and our own. Play becomes a moment of social life unto itself only with the symbolizing capacity that we alone possess. The message “this is play” is the first step in symbolic thinking about social life and the first step toward flexible social organization. This sort of organization, which is everywhere in our lives, is possible because we see the community as something outside ourselves, as something we can choose to take part in, or not. As we shall soon see, this is a crucial point for thinking about organizational change. With our capacity to take part in community, we can decide whether and how to invest ourselves, be this in physical, psychological, or even spiritual terms. In play, we come to the community fully human and fully alive. Out of play, we come to the community impoverished on both counts. For other animals, social life is completely different. For want of symbolizing capacity, they cannot master the message “this is play” and thus cannot take part in formal organization or in formal organizational

change[2]. While there may be such a thing as monkey business, there is no such thing as a monkey business.

Play is to know by its feeling

We come next to the epistemological question: How do we know play? We think of a conversation with a friend, a game of golf, a poem, a political battle, or a high school sock hop and right-away come to grief with a scientific outlook that reduces such things to ideas about individuals (e.g. about needs, values, goals, behaviors, and interactions) and/or to ideas about social structure (of social exchange, networks, structure, and function). To the contrary, play is something we “just know” without being able to say how. Play appears in feelings that, while wordless and beyond reason to define and catalogue, register surely in bodily intuitions. In philosophical terms, we can say with Pierce (1955) that play is to know by an intuitive process of abduction rather than rational process of induction or deduction. Or, we can say with Maritain (2001) that play is connatural knowledge rather than natural knowledge. It is:

[...] knowledge that is not clear like that obtained through concepts and conceptual judgments. It is obscure, unsystematic, vital knowledge, by means of instinct or sympathy, and in which the intellect, in order to make its judgments, consults the inner leanings of the subject (pp. 34-35).

Either way, we can see with Langer (1967) that the forms of play, like the forms of art (which are themselves play), cannot be fit to the discursive structure of language but are to feel.

Among the feelings of play there is the simple one of “being in it with others,” of taking part in something greater than ourselves – a story, a game, a fantasy, a project, a joke, a ritual, a sacrament. In this there are anticipations – of a story’s lesson, a putt on the way to the cup, a poetic feeling coming into view, an impending vote on the Senate floor, a sexual intrigue. And there are sufferings – of hardship for a story’s hero, of tribulation and pain in a closely fought game. There are triumphs – of resilience in the face of failure and of obstacles overcome. And there are feelings of new beginnings – of companionship, standing in the group, compassion, law and order, and a sexual relation.

Such feelings of play are feelings of undergoing, of movement on the way to an unknown and undecided resolution. The feeling may be of movement in one direction – such as a feeling of growth or development. Or the feeling may be of movement back and forth – such as a feeling of rhythm or contest. Or the feeling may be one of forces held in check, waiting for release – such as the feeling of a well-told joke on the way to a punch line. Whatever their nuances, such feelings as we have of play betoken its social life (Sandelands, 1998). Play is a feeling of social life – of a communal being having its own dynamics, its own history and future, and its own end. This is something we often become aware of in the breach; in the fragility of play – as its spell is broken by external concerns of the person or group.

As we saw in the puzzles above, although the feelings of play are felt in person, they are not personal. They are feelings not of an individual life apart from others, but of communal life. Again, with Gadamer (2004) and Huizinga (1950), we see that play comprises social life, that play is social life. Thus, its feelings are essentially social and refer to figures of social life such as contests, works of art, religious rituals, or even jokes.

Games are a case in point. The excitement of a game is the game itself, specifically its form, its inner dynamisms, its tensions, its growth and movement toward resolution. Likewise, the camaraderie of a construction crew building a house or of an engineering team designing an automobile is a feeling of the group at work, and specifically of its form – its inner dynamisms, tensions, growth, and movement toward completion. Play's feelings are appearances of communal life in the consciousness of a person. Such feelings are in sure affidavit of community beyond the person – a community alive in play.

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As we have seen, the symbolic aspect that is unique to our human play distinguishes our social life from every other. Play is for us, but not for any other animal, the leading edge of social innovation and change. Our creative symbolization in play makes new relations possible – new love, new division and unity, and new social structure. In play, we imagine new social divisions and new social unions and make them real. Indeed, every playful opposition is a fresh division in unity and a fresh unity in division. Play is a new love being born or an existing love being renewed. A generation ago, Huizinga (1950) made play the organizing principle and process of all human culture and civilization. His was a bold and brilliant stroke. He showed that from the cooperative agonism of play came all ritual, contest, game, art, language, commerce, government, jurisprudence, and even science – in a word, the entire content of human culture. Such cooperative agonism is love at play, a figure of love's tension of unity and division. On the one hand, play is cooperation – an expression of human unity. On the other hand, play is contest – an expression of the division and opposition of one interest from another. But play is no ordinary love. It is love alive, with a dynamic of its own. Play is love at the boundary of the unserious and the serious; at the boundary of fantasy and reality; at the boundary of what is possible and what is. As Huizinga (1950, p. 191) makes clear, this is where culture comes into being. We see that:

[...] this precarious balance between seriousness and pretense is an unmistakable and integral part of culture as such, and that the play-factor lies at the heart of all ritual and religion.

To this, we might only add that what is true of culture is true of all human community, including business.

The special significance of play for thinking about change in business is that play is the key to the vitality of human organizations and thus to their successful adaptation to new circumstances. As we have seen, play is an encompassing dynamic of love that fully engages those it touches – in what has been described as a selfless merger of oneness and peak experience. Moreover, by its “cooperative agonism,” play brings the parties of a community into contact and creative contest in which each can influence every other in formation of new community. This is not to say that human organizations cannot adapt without play – as indeed change can come in ways other than play – but it is to suggest that there is something special about the organizational adaptations that come through play. In the mutual attraction, synchrony, merger, selflessness, and unserious-seriousness of play each person meets and adjusts to every other with the result that each contributes more readily and more fully to the life of the whole. Organization is tested and refined by the intricate and exacting demands of contest. This is confirmed in the positive by a well-played ball game in which two

teams bring out the best efforts and organization in one another and the best team wins, or in a well-argued court case in which prosecution and defense teams argue to bring out all the facts of a case and a just verdict, or in a well-managed business in which various stakeholders (owners, workers, managers, customers, suppliers, regulators, competitors, and the greater community) interact for the good of all. And this is confirmed in the negative by a poorly played ball game, or poorly argued court case, or poorly managed business, in which participants violate the communal spirit of play by breaking its rules or by putting self-interest before the good of the group and the flow of the game, court case, or business. How often it seems that an organization breaks down and fails to adapt by not honoring the play element of its life. Again, as well-described by Huizinga (1950), it is in playful contest that human communities realize their possibilities of life.

In play there is thus an enlargement of the love and life of community. Play is love in a subjunctive mood. To contest in play (on the ball field, or in the courtroom, or in the workplace) is to set love's division and unity against one another in a new order that springs from the old. In play, creative fantasy meets and possibly changes reality (Sandelands, 2003). Indeed, it is this ongoing implication for the real that excites in play. What begins as a figure of love can become an instance of love. Such may be welcomed as players bring a new and adapted cooperation into their lives, or such may be feared as players carry a newly formed antagonism into their lives. The risk in play is that its antagonistic aspect may be sundered from its cooperative aspect and then taken seriously outside the play (when players depart company not as good sports but as embittered foes). This is the risk that can keep the timid from full participation in the play of life that is change (Blurton-Jones, 1967).

“Managing” change in organizations

The problem of managing change in organizations is often framed in terms of the three phases of change described by Lewin (1951): unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (Beckhard and Harris, 1987; Kotter and Cohen, 2002; Hendry, 1996; Lippitt *et al.*, 1985). For example, Lippitt *et al.* (1985) refer to these phases to offer a nine-point prescription for would-be managers of change:

- (1) involve all employees in planning for change;
- (2) communicate and use feedback;
- (3) consider effects on environment and group habits;
- (4) inform employees about the change effort before it commences;
- (5) build a trusting work climate;
- (6) use problem solving techniques;
- (7) involve people in the implementation of change;
- (8) ensure an early experience of successful change; and
- (9) quickly stabilize and spread successful change.

With this received view of managing change as backdrop, we can appreciate the practical insight that comes in seeing change as play – that is, in seeing change as the creative wave of love at the boundary of fantasy and reality. Play calls upon the deepest vitality of human community and thereby upon its greatest possibilities for

adaptation and development. Thus, while play is certainly not the only way that change can occur there can be change that is not played – play is the way to the deepest and most lasting change. In this regard it is instructive to look across the six approaches to change identified by Kotter and Schlesinger (1979):

- (1) education and communication;
- (2) participation and involvement;
- (3) facilitation and support;
- (4) negotiation and agreement;
- (5) manipulation and cooptation; and
- (6) explicit and implicit coercion.

Of these, only “Participation and involvement” can be reasonably likened to play. And of these, only “Participation and involvement” is credited by the authors as having the special advantage that: “People who participate will be committed to implementing change, and any relevant information they have will be integrated into the change plan” (p. 9). This approach contrasts most sharply with those of “Manipulation and cooptation” and “Explicit and implicit coercion” which the authors describe as risky because “inevitably people strongly resent forced change” (p. 8). Although Kotter and Schlesinger argue that the best approach to managing change must be decided by trade-offs of resistance, time, expense, and expertise, we can nevertheless see that the approach with the best prospect of deep and lasting change is that which most resembles play.

The value in seeing change as play is that it underlines two imperatives of change that deepen familiar prescriptions for its successful management. One of these is that change can happen as play only in a reality open to fantasy; in a reality that is held lightly enough to be played-upon or played-with. A light hold on reality facilitates unfreezing, which requires alert acceptance of possibly dangerous circumstances; promotes moving, which requires open-minded creativity in responding to difficult contingencies; and enables refreezing, which requires realistic acceptance of a new order of being. Of course, play can be a tall order for change, not least because business is fraught with risks that are hard to take lightly in the spirit of play. For example, managers may be unlikely to regard change as play in times of financial crisis when they may be inclined to draw in the reins of the business and to control its future (Staw *et al.*, 1981). Then, per Kotter and Schlesinger (1979), we might expect to see approaches to change that rely more on manipulation and cooptation or explicit and implicit coercion. Another imperative of change is that it can happen as play only as persons act in the love of community. Commitment to community facilitates unfreezing, which requires meeting circumstances that could threaten personal lives; promotes moving, which requires sensitive and apt integration of actions across persons; and enables refreezing, which requires acceptance of new community. Here, again play can be a tall order for change, not least because it supposes that managers will be open to involving all organization members in its process. For example, managers may be unlikely to regard change as play in the midst of a large downsizing in which many members are to be ushered to the door. Then, and again per Kotter and Schlesinger (1979), we might expect to see approaches to change that are less open and less friendly to employees. Taken together, the hand-in-glove fit between the two imperatives of change as play

and familiar prescriptions for managing change suggests a theoretical connection between them[3]. Could it be that, without saying so, our current theories of effective change management actually require viewing change as play? Might we be able to think productively about such theories as articulations of a fundamental play of change? This is an exciting prospect for future theory and research on managing change.

Further, by recalling the roots of play in love, we can reach even more deeply to note that the management challenge posed by the two imperatives of change above is just that of true love: of love that conquers all worry and hardship and that honors the dignity of every person and welcomes each in the community of the whole. This is the love spoken by Bakke (2005), founder and CEO of the AES Corporation, who describes it as the one and only formula for creating an adaptive self-managing workplace of play and true joy. And this is the love unspoken but implied by Senge (1990) who writes of the “indivisible whole” of the organization system and of astute managers who “manage” the system, not by dictating what others say and do, but to the contrary by calling upon the dynamism of life that includes and relates all. Without this true love, or at the limit of this true love, change in organizations forfeits its grounding in play and thereby its creative vitality and adaptive efficacy. Change becomes instead a mechanical imposition of managerial will subject to the limitations of managerial foresight and intelligence. Again, per Kotter and Schlesinger (1979), change becomes little more than education, facilitation, or negotiation; or more darkly it becomes manipulation, cooptation, or coercion.

These ideas about the play of change in organizations are not entirely new, as indeed few ideas are. In many ways, they recall those of perhaps our greatest student of management, Mary Parker Follett, who wrote wisely about the problems of change. She saw that a successful organization is a self-generating, self-reinforcing, and self-adjusting coordination. In a word, she saw that a successful organization is “play.” Organization, she wrote, is a functional relating:

Functional relating is the continuing process of self-creating coherence. Most of my philosophy is contained in that sentence. You can take that sentence, I believe, as a test for any part of business organization or business management. If you have the right kind of functional relating, you will have a process which will create a unity which will lead to further unities – a self-creating progression (Follett, 1942, p. 200).

With this image in mind Follett saw managing change as a task of creating the conditions for this self-creating progression of unity – conditions that meet both the requirement that the status quo be held lightly with openness to change and the requirement of cooperation in which members volunteer their efforts in a self-creating coherence. This is a task she thought of not as “management” in the sense of unilateral command and control, but as “leadership” in the sense of creating an abiding condition of love in which all could work toward a common goal:

The leader must be the leader of a coherent group, of men who are finding their material welfare, their most effective expression, their spiritual satisfaction, through their relations to one another, through the functioning of the group to which they belong (p. 268).

At this final juncture one could well imagine a skeptical practitioner, full of doubtful questions about how such a high-sounding program could be put into effect. How, he or she might ask, can a business be played when profits, livelihoods, and even the

business itself are at stake? How, under such circumstances, can members of an organization be encouraged to play lightly with fundamentals of the organization that involve them personally and that may require them to make significant sacrifices in their own lives? It all seems improbable, if not humanly impossible. In sympathy one must acknowledge that it would take a truly farsighted leader to do what would have to be done; namely, to define the business itself as an instance of play in which everything about it, including its most fundamental aspects of person, process, and structure, are to take lightly. This is to see the business within a context of love greater than the business itself; a context in which the purpose of the business is not the business itself, but the human lives of those it touches; a context in which no matter what comes of the business, each and every person is honored in their full dignity and each and every person is welcomed and included within the community of the whole. This is a transcendent love; a love not conformed to this world but which sees this world as anticipation of a greater one to come; a love that many identify with the divine. If change in organizations is truly to be played even and especially when the stakes are high it must be conducted in the light of a love greater than the organization itself. This I imagine is some of what Follett may have had in mind when she described the greatest demand upon the business leader. It seems to me a fitting postscript:

The leader releases energy, unites energies, and all with the object not only of carrying out a purpose, but of creating further and larger purposes. And I do not mean here by larger purposes mergers or more branches; I speak of larger in the qualitative rather than the quantitative sense. I mean purposes which will include more of those fundamental values for which most of us agree we are really living (Follett, 1942, p. 168).

Notes

1. This example and certain passages in the section on "Puzzles of Play" are adapted from Sandelands (2003).
2. While other animals create status hierarchies, they enact them involuntarily by instinct and do not recognize them as abstract structures apart from the concrete animals they contain.
3. I thank an anonymous reviewer of this paper for suggesting this theoretical connection – a connection to underscore the idea that play is the creative edge of change in our lives, and a connection to confirm that this is a sort of profundity that we can know without being aware of the fact.

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