

“Celebrating our Humanity: a Vision of Play and Possibility”

A Sermon by Rev. Doug Inhofe
Given at the Unitarian Congregation of Taos, New Mexico

June 17, 2018

Recently Katy and I attended a Gay Pride parade in Tulsa. I got out my beautifully-colored bracelet, the one I got at the Seco parade, the one that says “PFlag Taos” on it, and wore it with pride. I showed it off, it was like a newly-discovered artifact from a time ago. While waiting for the floats to start moving, a friend began to tell us about a book about finite games and infinite games. The setting couldn’t have been more apt, as you’ll see as we float along together today.

It’s enough to say that, just then, there were before us all the floats, all-covered with work that we would call art. There were all the people, perhaps fifty thousand of them, all-covered with adornments and tattoos and writings that we would call art. And there were the people themselves, surely all works of art, no matter how you conceive of our origins. And, to explain this coming together, there was a project—one begun long ago and one that will surely continue on deep into the future, a project to express our commitment and love to people without regard to whom they love.

So, what, you ask, is a finite game, and why title this sermon about *play* and *possibility*? Well, I thought you'd never ask!

Sit back and relax, and hark back to a time, long ago, to a gender-fied era of televised pageants of beauty, and behold a *finite* game. You know how she responds. You *know* how she responds! You've heard the question, you've heard the hackneyed answer, many times: "if you could have just one wish, what would it be?" . . . and what does she say? . . . [I am reluctant to act this out too dramatically, but] she says, "I would wish for world peace."

But really, what would that kind of world be like? What kind of world would it *have* to be like? Would it be a world where there were no disagreements, no arguments, no war, no suffering? Would it be a world where there was no futile striving, no unrequited love, no frustrated hopes, no unfulfilled dreams?

This kind of analysis might be called hypothetical nullification: it suggests that something about the way we are, as humans, would have to be left out of such a world. But it suggests too that this something might be, on balance, something we might like to hold on to. Perhaps this is an unsolvable puzzle.

Still, consider, head on, what it would mean to live in a world where there were no competing interests, and thus no tension-filled arrangements of people in which it was impossible for all their aspirations to come true. This kind of analysis

might be called stretching a point. Perhaps, it too, is an unsolvable puzzle: we cannot have it all.

Miss American herself might show us that. After all, she's just won, and there she is—as the song goes—speaking to the world from center stage, basking in the bright lights of fame, while, if you look closely, there in the background—behind her you see—are the ones whom she's just beat . . . the losers, as they are delicately called. They are a necessary part of the game.

Such a game is a finite game. It's a game where the participants choose to play, where there must be opponents, where there are rules, where there are eligibility requirements, where there are time limits, and, most significantly, where when the time is up and it comes to an end there is a winner: determining the winner is the whole point. And then everyone agrees to give the winner the title, if even begrudgingly, and now it's time to go home and begin to think about dinner.

Is this, then, the end of our analysis, the end of our imagining the world as it might be? Are we left now with nothing but finite games as models for how we shall live? Do our unsolvable puzzles stand utterly in the way, rebuking us for being so optimistic—so silly?—for imagining that there might be a model for a better way to live?

I think there is one. Indeed, it's a model that's been used, effectively, throughout all of history, in behalf of marginalized and oppressed peoples

everywhere. And, better yet, it's a model that each of us can use in our own lives. This model is the "infinite games" that my friend told me about, back at the Gay Pride parade. It's what James P. Carse (yes, *that* James P. Carse!) writes about in his *Finite and Infinite Games* (1986).

As I listened to my friend, it occurred to me that, seeing myself as a player in an infinite game made things so much easier—there was something timeless and organic and value-driven about, well, about seeing my life with Katy—for an example—as an infinite game. In it, the criterion for my participating in this game would be simply "what should I do to keep it going?" The simplicity was overwhelming to me . . . and, in sensing *that*, I felt I could see all the way through, *with one very long-lens but in one very real picture*, all the way to my own end and to the time beyond.

Much of our lives, as you might've guessed, is arranged as finite games. I'm not suggesting that finite games are unnatural. When something is really a "game" for us, in the sense that it's a diversion, the game focuses our attention and takes us out of the moment. (You know, that one we're supposed to be in so much!) And, focused as we are, we can get a lot of "gaming" done—or, to be more specific, a lot of work, if work's the game we're in. Things do need to be done. [As an aside] Maybe even the kindergarten parable of the ant and the grasshopper told us this—

and, so it seems, for there have been those grading us ever since, busy being good ants!

To be fair, finite games work well in their own realms. In the same way that their characteristics led to our crowning of Miss America, they lead to results that are driven by the rules. We take this to mean “predictability,” and generally speaking that’s true: the more we know of the rules, the better we can predict.

This certainty, we imagine, can salve our anxiety about our futures. But I think it doesn’t: there is no easy way to side-step the “unsolvable puzzles,” the ones telling us that hope is futile and that humans are incorrigible. But there is a way.

There are useful games that are not time-limited. These other games are not finite but infinite; they are games for a life beyond certainty. They leave behind a “winning” effort, aimed at wealth or status or power, in favor of insuring the continuation of play itself. This is a meta-world where the rules may change, even the participants, but the game never ends. Indeed, to take another meta step, the very knowledge that the game will continue—that *that’s* the objective!—can itself guide our actions, can give us a standard for how to be: if you’re in love with someone or something, a project or (try this!) a congregation, then the game plan is to do what keeps the love continuing.

So what's an infinite game got that a finite one doesn't? For one thing, it avoids the seriousness of our day-to-day lives, and it opens the door to a more subtle, more playful way of being, to an arena of much greater possibilities. *The joyfulness of infinite play, its laughter, lies in learning to start something we cannot finish.* [p.26]

Infinite players do not win titles, so that they may be known, so that they may be immortal. Instead they play as mortals, in games that will continue after they have died, and instead of titles they have only their names. [id.] Finite play is contradictory because the players desire to bring play to an end—they want it to be over, to have won, and to go home . . . to something less serious! Infinite players desire to continue to play precisely because they believe in the goals that continuing to play will continue to serve.

The Miss America pageant was a time-limited game, a contest of beauty and poise and talent. *But it was most decidedly not an effort to achieve world peace.* It was “serious” because the players had chosen it as a way to resolve the puzzles: they imagined they could create a diversion from living a life of meaningful values and could substitute for it an abstraction, one built on a bed of rules, one that would give them meaning. And shield them from anxiety.

Making such a decision has one major drawback: it commits one absolutely to endowing, subjectively, the new, created, finite game with “seriousness.” Thus

the players' lives became nothing more than the very abstract game they had created themselves. A winner-driven game thus comes to stand in for life. We learn to demand a prize at the end. Our sense of what can be accomplished in this world becomes fixed . . . the future is limited, when it's over it's over. Our sense of what ought to be accomplished, of what is possible, becomes entrained to the rules—and everyone knows that you can't change the rules in the middle of the game!

Values are left behind. [objects in the mirror are closer than they appear]

Everything about our ways of making a better future, for us and for all those who will ever live after us, suffers: our optimism, our courage, our playfulness, our still-as-yet-not-fully-formed hopes for the future, our willingness—our ability!—to envision and then to make long-term commitments.

Evidence for this suffering is all around, once you start looking for it. The middle class suffers as executives heed only the next quarter's numbers and their own salaries, the workers' hopes for continuing employment be damned. The effectuation of the climate accords—indeed, the world itself—suffers as countries gauge their short-term economic interests as predominantly important.

So, I say, to hell with the rules—let's imagine a world with infinite games, ones where the rules are there to promote a never-ending continuation of play. . . . When we see that there is about to be a victor, and a spate of losers, well, let's look

into what the rules are trying to accomplish here, and let's re-write the rules as we go to keep the game alive, to keep alive a continuing relationship among the players. Let's ask why we ought to have rules for games that people take so seriously, even when the games' outcomes produce little of value, even when the players veil from themselves that they are actually playing a role. [How else could they be so serious?]

Let's be less concerned about rules for these very serious players, and let's instead be playful enough to relate as joyous, free persons, having a relationship that is open to surprise, one where everything that happens is of consequence.

Let's cast out things that seem like rules of debate, designed to limit discourse and select a winner. Let's have rules that will be like the grammar of a living language, always evolving to promote the meaningfulness of discourse, always there to help us—the players—to find a way of continuing the discourse. Of making it infinite.

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Here is where someone in the back [always in the back . . . you know the joke, it's turtles all the way down] finally's had enough, raises her hand part way up, and says, "can you give us some examples of an infinite game? And are you saying that all finite games are frivolous or trivial?" To the second question, the answer's been suggested: an economy requires finite games, for not everyone can

be an electrician or a teacher or a certified mechanic or a brain surgeon, or play for the Yankees, without the approval of their potential colleagues and competitors.

Without rules.

And, yes, now to the first question—three examples, actually, one involving women, one involving Jews, and one involving black Americans: all of them groups who've been marginalized if not worse by a vision of a world that created not only the games and the rules but also the winners and losers they produced.

The gays . . . well, the Genesis of this sermon was the Gay Pride parade itself! I rest my case.

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In 1982, Carol Gilligan, a Harvard-based psychologist, published *In a Different Voice*. There she espoused a care-based ethics, one a lot different from earlier systems about how to act in this world. She explained, with completely justifiable glee, that the then much-vaunted “six stages of moral development” were bankrupt: they had been put together by men, they focused on abstract principles and a stern sense of moral duty, and under them it was unusual for girls to reach the sixth stage of moral development—most of them stopped at three!

In its place she proposed a maternal, care-focused ethics based on spontaneous feelings of caring, compassion, intimacy, and empathy. It became known as feminist ethics. It was followed by Sharon Welch's book, *A Feminist*

Ethic of Risk, published in 1990. There she, as Gilligan had done, left behind a patriarchal world of linear thinking, one that led people, and governments, to avoid repairing the world where the effort could not guarantee success: efforts like getting rid of drunk drivers, or embarking on a nuclear non-proliferation program. Men couldn't say "this is how they can be done" because the problems wouldn't submit to the finite models for how to get from here to there. [The problem of building an atomic bomb, you see, would! What luck!]

But women could do it, they would take the risk of starting something whose end could not be promised or even seen. They started Mothers Against Drunk Drivers [MADD], and it worked—drunk-driving problems were not eliminated, but they were substantially reduced. And as difficulties in the MADD model arose, they changed the rules to stay ahead of the surprises that kept occurring. They knew there would be some, and they were ready to stay engaged—to change the rules to make sure that their infinite game would continue.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg is engaged in the same venture—as *RBG*, the movie, reveals. She, along with a lot of others, men and women alike, are devoted to continuing another infinite game, one based squarely on Gilligan's and Welch's feminist ethics. One called legal feminism. [piece here on how my raising a generally specious "man-woman" dichotomy is simply a construct to show the history of the ethics of risk . . . not to reflect on today's reality, which, well . . .]

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Black Americans in the 1960's were not assuaged by the Civil Rights Act or the Voting Rights Act—the new rules were good ones, but they couldn't change the racism that underlay the inner-city riots. Racism was not a finite game and couldn't be changed with new, finite-game rules. What was required was a social and cultural transformation that would permit black people to be seen, and to see themselves, in power.

Whether she imagined being engaged in an infinite game, Elaine Brown, the former chairwoman of the Black Panther Party, had this to say then about the possibility of transformation of America's racism . . . what she had to say could stand as prologue to charitable organizations' statements of intention the world over: "If you are committed—if you seriously make a commitment (and that commitment must be based not on hate but on love). . . then you gon' have to realize that this may have to be a lifetime commitment. . . . So don't get hung up on your own ego and your own image and pumping up your muscles and putting on a black beret or some kinda Malcolm X hat or whatever other regalia and symbolic *vestment* [sic] you can put on your body. Think in terms of what are you going to do for black people. I'm saying that these are the long haul."

The game will continue, as new rules help people to find new ways to be in relation to each other, and to respond to the hoped-for surprises—perhaps like the

ones in the new movie, *Black Panther*, whose success arises from showing black people in power. Here the surprise is not only that the movie has the sense to show black people in power, not because of paternalism or patronage or condescension, but because of the way they are. The meta-surprise is that so many who thought they were racially even-handed now know they weren't. They see now their surprise that their smug world of race relations had not yet got there, and they can see this because they now see what "there" looks like. And—to top it all off—they see this in the final surprise itself, the black people in power.

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The third example involves a Jewish concept, *tikkun olam*, which translates roughly as repairing the world. It's an entreaty to spend one's days doing just that, despite the certainty that the world will never be fully repaired. It's a MADD occasion all over, albeit one that Jews have pursued for a very, very long time. Aside from the good work it engenders, its beauty lies in the side-step that it permits, relieving one from anxiety over not doing the impossible. And, finally, it captures other ideas current in other Jewish thinking, including two dimensions of some Hasidic teachings.

The first of these is the belief in God's immanence in all aspects of the material world, all dimensions and aspects of reality. This belief has the view that joy is the preferred human attitude. Earlier attitudes had been to adopt a severe

melancholic attitude, as a safeguard from temptation and sin. But joy worked better, for it could be expressed with the body, in music and dance, and, even in the darkest of circumstances, it could turn into a defiant posture.

An effort was made during WWII, in the Warsaw Ghetto, to record daily life for posterity; the precious documents that resulted were sealed and buried in milk bottles. Notes now unearthed show that, near a small synagogue there, a large banner hung that said “Jews Do Not Despair.” The writing then goes on: “The Jews there dance as they did before the war. A man whose daughter had died the day before danced the next day after prayers.” It’s a surprise of sorts: joy become defiance.

The second, fundamental element of this infinite sensibility was the idea to enlarge the sphere of religiously meaningful acts to include mundane secular activities as well as genuinely religious rituals. This idea blurred the line between the sacred and the profane. And, as a result, every activity performed with the proper consciousness could become a meaningful religious encounter.

These two sensibilities appealed to new thinkers, such as Martin Buber, who saw in them a path to reenchanting the world in opposition to the spread of [ready for this?, what are the greatest evils of the world today?] technology and instrumental reason. [Here, read “instrumental reason” as the rules designed by men, long ago, to govern all the finite games in the world!] And so this Jewish

tradition presented an openness to revelation while encountering what seemed to be the most mundane matters. For Buber and others (including us!), the tradition put at its center a continuous possibility for wonder.

If the Hasidic Jews can pull it off, surely we Unitarians can!

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Let me conclude this way.

I remember thinking, here's a new perspective on such things, it sets me free from imagining that difficulties must be worked out on a timetable, from imagining that there will be no surprises, from fretting over not having anticipated them, from fooling myself into thinking I'm serious in a life where being playful might be more creative . . . put more affirmatively, it tells me what the criterion for all my decisions should be, about how I might act in my relations: simply put, I should do all I can to make sure the relations continue. And I should trust that the others are doing this too.

I can feel strong because I can allow others to do what they wish in the course of my play with them. I can look forward, not to a victory, but to ongoing play in which the direction of the past will require constant re-valuing in the present. I can initiate my actions in such a way that others will respond by initiating their own. That we are all in this together is part of the game, and thus my future will unfold as it does for many reasons, including how everyone chooses

to play the game with all the others, including me. This encourages me to play so as to keep the game going, to see that, in some ways, I can play most freely as I age, for as I become less necessary to the continuation of play, I will play best and most freely.

Think of how your relations with others have evolved over the years. Can you sense in your own changes that your life is, like art, something dramatic (not theatrical), something always opening forward, something beginning that cannot be finished? There are no scripted roles for us, and the absence of any finite rules for performance constitutes—precisely because of the absence of rules—our lives as art. We can watch what persons do and discover the artistry in it.

Putting this in the infinite game language, infinite players prepare themselves to be surprised by the future, they play in complete openness. It is not an openness as in candor, but an openness as in vulnerability. It does not expose one's unchanging identity but rather one's ceaseless growth.

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I like the idea of this congregation's being engaged in an infinite game, evolving in step with all the actions each takes with all the others, all working to keep it going continuously. The values are community, service, and love. The horizon is whatever we can imagine. It is not a limit. We can do all this together, with laughter, playfulness, and an eye peeled for the possibilities of surprise.

Amen.

Possible readings:

Intricate and untraceable / weaving and interweaving, / dark strand with light:
Designed, beyond / All spiderly contrivance, / To link, not to entrap:
Elation, grief, joy, contrition, entwined; / shaking, changing, forever forming,
transforming:
All praise, all praise to the great web. --Denise Levertov

Not any self-control or self-limitation / for the sake of specific ends,
but rather a carefree letting go of oneself:
not caution, but rather a wise blindness; / not working to acquire silent,
slowly increasing possessions, but rather
a continuous squandering of all perishable values. --Rainer Maria Rilke

Rilke's "O, Anxious One" (?)