

Education in a Playful Universe

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The 13th century Sufi poet Muhammad Rumi [نی دل الالاج [ی مور دم حم] vividly incorporates the image of dance and movement in his lyrics, while the Mevlevi Order of Sufi Islam (popularly known as 'Whirling Dervishes') was founded on Rumi's teachings. Such expressions of emotive joy were among the favourites of my students, when I served as Director of Inter-Religious Studies at St. Xavier's College in Mumbai. The testimony of a college student in our Honours course, 'Awakening to Cosmic Compassion,' gives an idea of the impact that movement and embodied meditation makes on learning.¹

The 'Poem of the Atoms' by Rumi sent me into a state of ecstatic joy. I felt like dancing to celebrate my connection with the universe. During the meditation, I could feel vibrations in my hands and my arms. I could imagine the Earth rotating as we lay prostrate. When I rolled over on my back, I could take in every feeling I felt the connection to the universe deep inside my bones During the ACC course, I danced with freedom, with openness and vulnerability I think the dancing was a kind of healing, like a final release. I have just never danced this way before! To let go of every inhibition, every fear, to reveal myself finally, to breathe as the real me, to move as the real me ... !²

This student's deep insight reveals a need in education for expanded programs of creativity, joy and expression – for learners, teachers, administrators and parents, for people of all ages. It is a need that Big History is well-positioned to provide.³ As Rumi wrote about his wonderment with the universe:

Each atom dancing in the plain
Or in the air,
Behold it like us, insane
It spinneth there.
Each atom, whether glad it be
Or sorrowful,
Circlith the sun in ecstasy
Ineffable.⁴

From the atoms in our bodies to the stars in the galaxies everything is involved in motion, a veritable cosmic dance. Simple adjustments in our daily life can have profound effects in reinforcing expansive, big-history connections. At the Roman Catholic Ash Wednesday liturgy, the traditional prayer while applying ashes to each devotee's forehead is: 'Dust you are and unto dust you shall return.' But, in the college, we initiated the alternative: 'Stardust you are and unto stardust you shall return.' As a result, I am now filled with an ecstatic sense of hope that overcomes the fear of death, for that, even if we die, we will be returning home to the universe and shining as a star somewhere!

Need for a Revolution in Education

Educator Ken Robinson, in his Ted Talk, 'Do Schools Kill Creativity?', makes the provocative observation: 'There isn't an education system on the planet that teaches dance every day to children the way we teach them mathematics'⁵ Most education focuses on academic themes that strengthen the dominant left brain with topics and skills that are job-oriented. This is a worldwide pattern. The arts (dance, drama, music and painting) are given secondary importance and are usually included as optional, extra-curricular activities. The major concern of most students today is to get good results in their exams, which serve as a passport to a job that will give them money, status and power in society.

Despite efforts at reform, we still find ourselves trapped in an antiquated educational system that is preoccupied with amassing information, rather than stimulating discovery and triggering transformation. How long do we continue with making just small adjustments to a system that we have inherited from the time of the Industrial Revolution? These tiny reforms only succeed in effecting some cosmetic changes to a structure that is deeply entrenched 'in the box.' The rapid pace of change in the 21st century calls for re-imagination beyond narrow boundaries. Something more radical is demanded and nothing short of a revolution will suffice.

Playful Universe

What can we learn from observing the universe, which is our primary educator, according to philosopher Thomas Berry. Dance is built into the universe. Who is not fascinated by the dance of dolphins and peacocks, birds and butterflies, fish and snakes? The blooming and blossoming

of flowers display a unique dance of their own. We nonchalantly speak of dancing waves and leaves dancing in the wind. In many Indian communities, as in tribal cultures, there is a dance for every important occasion like birth, death, and weddings. Religious and cultural festivals are often linked with the rhythms of nature. The whole of creation is connected with this fascinating dance. Dance reminds us that we are part of a playful universe that is constantly in motion.

Play, which includes dance, is all-pervasive in nature. Steve Keil, an advocate for transformative play, states: 'Evolution has selected, over millions and billions of years, for play in animals and in humans.' Ants and elephants play; so do rats and cats, dogs and bears. Play is innate in children. We are hardwired to play from childhood to old age. Stuart Brown, a researcher on play, claims that humans are 'the most youthful, the most flexible, the most plastic of all creatures.'⁶ From the atoms in our bodies to the stars in the galaxies everything is in constant motion, everything is involved in a cosmic dance.

Does it not seem quite crazy that in a playful universe that is vibrant with motion, for most of the time, students are stuck behind desks passively listening to teachers transmitting information? Teachers also have a hard time to raise the flagging interest of passive students. There is hardly any play, dance or movement in a normal classroom, with not much scope to discover and innovate. Students have a lot of fun when they feed their hunger for the arts in the various cultural programmes that nurture the right brain. There is much informal learning too that takes place in extracurricular activities and exposure visits.

God at Play

The extent to which God and dance have been divorced from each other can be gauged by the celebration of movement and music by agnostic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who inextricably linked dance to spirituality.⁷ In the Indian tradition, the Hindu creation myths depict a god in motion. Shiva or Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer, who is considered to be the source of all movement in the universe, revels in the ecstatic dance of creation, preservation, and dissolution.⁸

We also have the multifaceted Krishna as the uninhibited child, the playful prankster, the elegant dancer and the captivating flute-player for whom life is *leela* (divine play) in the universe – the playground of life.⁹ This is a compelling reminder that life is playful and joyful.

Quantum physicist and philosopher Fritjof Capra shows that modern physics and traditional Eastern mysticism concur on the reality of cosmic dance.

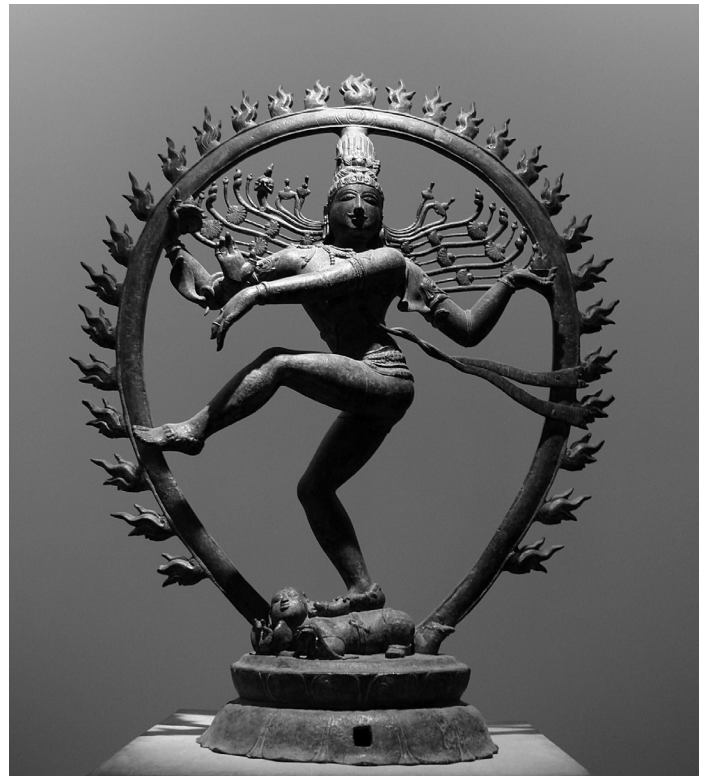


Image 1: Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer, Hindu source of movement in the universe. Bronze statue, Tamil Nadu, India, 11th century CE, Guimet Museum, Paris, France. Wikimedia Commons.

Modern physics has shown us that movement and rhythm are essential properties of matter; that all matter, whether here on earth or in outer space, is involved in a continual cosmic dance. The Eastern mystics have a dynamic view of the universe similar to that of modern physics, and consequently it is not surprising that they too, have used the image of the dance to convey their intuition of nature.¹⁰

Many are not aware that, in early Christianity, the Greek term *περιχώρησις* [*perichoresis*], the relationship between the Holy Trinity of the Father-Son-Holy Ghost] is also a dance metaphor. The word *peri* means 'around' and *chorea* means 'dance', and *perichoresis* has been used to symbolize the intimate dance of the Trinity into which human beings are invited to join.¹¹ Church tradition has been so caught up with heady philosophical speculation that this embodied trinitarian image used by the early Church has not been popularized.

Jesus, who is usually presented as a serious person, uses the playful pedagogy of the parables to educate his disci-

ples. The fact that children were attracted to him is a sign of his warm and spontaneous personality. In the post-Resurrection narratives, one notices Jesus mischievously playing hide-and-seek with Mary Magdalene and his disciples. So there is an abundance of warm, playful images Jesus, if one just thinks to look for them in the Gospels.

The 13th century Rhineland mystic, Meister Eckhart, who was censured for his radical ideas, once preached a sermon with an unusual title, 'God Laughs and Plays.' After reading this sermon, I googled 'God and laughter,' but was shocked to find a YouTube video of demonic laughter. On reflection, I was puzzled why laughter is associated with demons and why images of a laughing God are hard to find. This has since changed.

This perception was dramatically altered when I took a group of students from St. Xavier's College, as part of our Honours course on the 'Joy of Self Discovery,' to Asha Daan, a home run by Mother Teresa's nuns for the physically and mentally challenged destitute. While preparing the students for interactive meditation, a terribly deformed child, whose gender was difficult to ascertain, came into the centre of the group and began wishing each one of us well, with

delightful, unabashed laughter. Like a bolt of lightning, an insight – almost mystical – hit me: This is the laughter of God, a God who is beyond gender, a God whose face shines resplendent in vulnerable brokenness.

Benefits of Play

Lack of play leads to ill-health and a host of diseases. Experiments have shown that depriving rats and kittens of play leaves them handicapped with regard to social skills. Studies have shown that deprivation of play in humans can lead to violence and even murder.¹² Our personal experience confirms the benefits that research shows about play.

Play stimulates joy and is a great antidote to depression. It is a great stress-buster. Play not only keeps us physically fit but also lights up the brain when neural growth in the amygdala, the area that is linked with emotions, is activated. The pre-frontal cortex, which controls cognition, is also stimulated. Play enhances emotional maturity and decision-making.¹³ It develops cooperation, collaboration, creativity and other skills for teamwork, while it cultivates empathy that can offset narcissism. Play encourages



Image 2: St. Xavier College students at Asha Daan, a home run by Mother Teresa's nuns in Byculla, Mumbai, India, 2 October 2016. Photograph by Fr. Cleo Braganza SDB.

risk-taking and develops confidence, so we can solve problems; it kindles the imagination to think out of the box and fosters adaptability.

These are precisely the skills needed for life, as well as for jobs in whatever field one chooses. As noted by psychologist Peter Gray: 'From a biological evolutionary perspective, play is nature's means of ensuring that young mammals, including young human beings, acquire the skills that they need to acquire to develop successfully into adulthood.'¹⁴ So it looks obvious that play should play a great role in any education system.

There is an urgent need for a paradigm shift to safeguard and promote community wellbeing. We need to think more of *We* than *I*. This implies moving from an individualist, competitive, consumerist culture to one that is more communitarian, collaborative, and compassionate. Thich Nhat Hanh, a brave and reknowned Buddhist monk, promoted *interbeing* as a way of life. He captured this countercultural mentality in his maxim: 'To be is to interbe.' Likewise, *ubuntu* is a valuable Bantu concept for collective, interconnected humanity that also conveys this needful idea of interdependence.¹⁵

In the Hindu tradition, the Sanskrit phrase, वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् [*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum*, One Earth Family] envisages the entire planet as one family [*Vasu* = Earth, *kutumbakum* = family]. This concept that is often translated "the whole world is one family" encompasses not only humans but all the inhabitants on the planet. Similarly the 17th century poet-saint Sant Tukaram from Maharashtra sings of the enchantment of birds, trees, air, nature and the whole universe considered as a family.¹⁶ Personal wellbeing is interconnected with community well-being and the well-being of the entire planet. Besides the traditional golden rule of loving neighbour as self, fidelity to the green rule of loving the Earth as oneself offers hope for the future.

Play is Fun but not Frivolous

There is a common tendency to discard play as pointless. Play is surely fun, but it is not frivolous. Those who do not consider play serious enough would do well to heed the advice of the mystic Thomas Merton to his colleague Jacques Maritain:

... and do what you do more as play than as work, which does not mean that it is not serious: for the most serious thing in the life of a Christian is play... All life is in reality the playing and dancing of the Child-God in His world, and we, alas have not seen it and known it.¹⁷

In a similar vein, Indian Jesuit spiritual-guide Anthony de Mello shares an interesting eastern wisdom story:

The Master once referred to the Hindu notion that all creation is '*leela*' – God's play – and the universe is his playground. The aim of spirituality, he claimed, is to make all life play.

This seemed too frivolous for a puritanical visitor.

'Is there no room then for work?'

'Of course there is. But work becomes spiritual only when it is transformed into play.'¹⁸

For those who consider work and play as opposites, psychiatrist Stuart Brown offers sound advice on integrating play into our daily lives.

So I would encourage you all to engage not in the work-play differential – where you set aside time to play – but where your life becomes infused minute by minute, hour by hour, with body, object, social, fantasy, transformational kinds of play. And I think you'll have a better and more empowered life.¹⁹

Type of Play

It is good to note that play includes a wide range of right-brain activities like dance, music, visual arts, humour, and meditation. What we refer to here is not competitive play, focused on victory or loss and resulting in stress, nor the type of contemporary play that has been highly commercialised. Our kind of play is best exemplified by a practice called InterPlay.²⁰ It facilitates improvised movement, song, story, shape and stillness, based on the wisdom of the body. I was fortunate to discover InterPlay during a sabbatical in Berkeley, California in 2004. At one of their retreats, I became aware of the call to be a bridge for global peace.

On my return to India, and through the newly launched InterPlay India movement, we organised peace pilgrimages. InterPlay has been used in India for many groups, ranging from the educated elite and tribal communities to poor basti-dwellers, ill patients, confined prisoners, sex workers, transgender folks, and many others. We pioneered efforts in awakening the joy of compassion beyond boundaries, where these interactive activities encouraged ways of getting in touch with personal, inter-personal and social bodies, as well as connections to nature and the universe. In the course of time, I merged InterPlay with Eastern forms of spiritual activity to develop a new practice called *Cosmic Meditation*.



Image 3: Cosmic Meditation at Fireflies Ashram in Dinnepalya, Karnataka, India, 2016. Prashant Olalekar, developer of Cosmic Meditation, is centre left in the dark kurta. Photograph by Shabin Paul.

The idea of 'meditation' usually brings up images of tranquillity, so most participants expect that they will sit cross-legged and motionless. They are pleasantly surprised by the ordinary movements of walking, running, and improvising. From time to time, we challenge them to notice their sensations, feelings, memories, or thoughts. We then take this activity further, when they are asked to flit like a butterfly, swim like a fish, fly like a bird, or sway like a tree. Through simple, creative movements, they explore their innate connections for themselves, with each other, and in nature.

The participants are gradually made aware of their inner universe and its intimate connection with the outer universe. After spontaneous movement, they have the oppor-

tunity to enter the depths of stillness and experience deep relaxation. This process of mindful awareness, together with other inputs, leads to a transformation of consciousness. They are guided to trust the wisdom of the body: personal, communitarian, and cosmic.

We also do the Cosmic Walk, which is a reflection of our on-going 13.8 billion year journey. It is made of fifty meters of rope (with each three-metres representing a billion years) in the shape of an open-ended coil. The events of our universe are marked along the coil, according to the time-frame, and tagged with a candle. A reader narrates the story, beginning with the Big Bang, represented by a large candle in the centre of the coil. A walker lights a candle from the



Image 4: Students reflect during the Cosmic Walk. St. Xavier College Retreat Centre, Khandala, Maharashtra, India. Photograph by Orla Hazra, 2016.

original flame and, as each event of our cosmic history is narrated, s/he lights the candle beside the event. Arriving in the present moment, emerging from the labyrinth of time, the walker announces: 'Today, I know the story of myself.'²¹

Cosmic Meditation has become a highly useful tool for embodiment at the 'Awakening to Cosmic Compassion' Honours course. Together with the Cosmic Walk, it provides an opportunity to embody and integrate learnings from the Universe Story, which traces the evolutionary journey of the universe from the Big Bang about 13.8 billion years ago to our present times. I also use Cosmic Meditation for other courses, retreats and sessions that include marginalised groups in rural and urban areas.²²

In 2015, as part of the Special Course on Environment for first-year Bachelor of Arts students at St. Xavier's Col-

lege, we presented the film, *Journey of the Universe*, which narrates the process of cosmic evolution and discusses the complexity, connectivity and creativity permeating the universe.²³ A brief meditation to help students integrate the message in the film followed, in which the insight that we have the same atoms as the stars in our bodies provided them with a strong personal connection with the universe.

Challenge: Can we Design a Playful Education for a Playful Universe?

If the purpose of education is to prepare students for the future, then how do we educate them so that they can make their contribution to a rapidly changing world? Two qualities that they will undoubtedly need in large measure are

creativity and flexibility, which are the major points of play. Due to science and technology in a globalised world, our horizons are being considerably widened, and we are becoming conscious that we are part of a global village. However, we often draw up development plans and policies as though the entire planet and the wider universe do not exist. Alarming signals of global warming are compelling us to take ecological factors like pollution, climate change and ecocide into account.

Eco-theologian Matthew Fox reminds us of the original purpose of formal education: 'University originally meant a place where one went to experience his or her place *in the universe* – thus, to find wisdom.'²⁴ Thomas Berry offered his new perspective by situating education in the overall context of the universe. He wrote:

The American college may be considered a continuation, at the human level, of the self-education processes of the earth itself: universe education, earth education, and human education are stages of development in a single education process. We cannot adequately discuss any stage of the development without seeing it within this comprehensive context.

By universe education I do not mean universal education or university education, but the education which identifies with the emergent universe in its variety of manifestations from the beginning until now. So, too, by earthy education I do not mean education about the earth, but the earth as the immediate self-educating community of those living and nonliving beings that constitute the earth. I might also go further and designate earth as the primary educational establishment, or the primary college, with a record of extraordinary success over some billions of years.²⁵

To spell out the implications of the paradigm shift involved in regarding the universe or the Earth as the core reference point of education will require a separate paper. It is important to take note that, while it is vital to consider the local and global context in the educational process, so too the comprehensive context of the universe and Earth is absolutely essential.

Why is play, which has such a tremendous potential for learning, so divorced from education, with play exiled to the playground and education to the classroom? This paper is my earnest plea for a complementary arts-based

approach to education, in order to balance the one-sided emphasis on the right brain. Play will have a key role in this new system. This will require a step-by-step process in a strategy for structural transformation. It will involve a host of changes in curriculum, teaching pedagogies, appropriate venues for classes, frequent exposures to listen to the poor and Mother Earth. It will be well worth it, for the rewards will be immense in the field of education and for the challenging future for which the students are being prepared.

Play can revolutionise education and make it come alive with much more fun. Study, work and life can become much less stressful and much more enjoyable. Integrating it into the educational system will be a great challenge. Opportunities will have to be provided so that students can learn how to integrate study and play as a foretaste of integrating work and play later. We are being trained for work, can we be trained for playful work?

Educator and peace-activist Satish Kumar makes a plea for a holistic approach to education that involves not just heads but hearts and hands too.²⁶ We believe that education is about catering to the integral growth of the whole human person to play a transformative role not only in a globalised world but an evolving universe. One of the best ways to do this is to learn the art of play from the universe and to use it effectively in the pedagogical process!²⁷

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Endnotes

1. This was one of the Awakening to Cosmic Compassion (ACC) special Honours courses that was co-facilitated in September 2016 by Department of Inter-Religious Studies (DIRS), St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. Besides the DIR's regular academic courses, these special Honours courses provided scope for innovation with creative assignments. Its team consisted of Orla O'Reilly Hazra (PhD), Candice Menezes (MASW, MPhil), and Prashant Olalekar, (SJ, DMin).

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3. My thanks to Orla Hazra for introducing me and so many others in India to the Big History movement and to Barry Rodrigue at Symbiosis International University. This led to our offering of Cosmic Meditation sessions for Big History events in India and US.

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