

FINITE AND INFINITE GAMES

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, December 31, 2006
John A. Buehrens, Minister

I hope you've had a good holiday-- one in which you have found time just to do nothing, except to play --because there's a lesson for the New Year in learning to be more playful.

The other night, for example, my wife Gwen and I talked about going out to the movies. She wanted to see George Clooney in *The Good German*, while I said that I wanted to see *The Good Shepherd*, with Matt Damon. So we decided just to stay to home until someone makes a movie called *The Good German Shepherd*.

Instead we spent the evening playing Scrabble. Personally, I like playing with words, although my family seems to think I take far too much time searching for the seven-letter, triple word score bonanza. Frankly, I've been completely envious ever since I heard that on October 12 of this year, in the basement of First Parish in Lexington, MA, a carpenter named Michael Cresta not only scored the highest point total ever recorded for a single word in Scrabble – 365 for QUIXOTRY, seven letters, on two triple word scores – but also the highest total for a player in one game – 830 – and, along with his opponent, Michael Yorra, a counter-man at a local deli, the highest total for a single game, 1320.

When my family wants to make me move faster, they insist on switching to Boggle – where the letters are all thrown out on a grid, and the trick is to identify the most words no one else can see in the few minutes allotted, with more points for the longer words. Generally speaking, I lose at that one. My attention goes for quality but loses on quantity.

This seems a good time to reflect on many and various games we humans seem to play. After all, New Year's Eve is like an arbitrary timekeeper saying, "Stop! Take count: what's the score?" Not that I recommend looking at things this way; quite the contrary.

In a little book he wrote some 30 years ago now, with the title *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, my friend Jim Carse talked about the difference: “A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.”

Jim taught the history and literature of religion at New York University for many years, and served as Scholar in Residence at the Unitarian Church of All Souls at my invitation when I was a minister there. In the West, he noticed, we have been deeply influenced by the idea of time and history being linear – with a beginning, a middle, and a final end. With winners and losers at every stage.

In Jim’s lifetime and mine – ours – game theory has arisen as a branch of mathematics and economics to model how players choose different actions in an attempt to maximize their returns within a set of finite constraints – set by resources, knowledge, and time. Game theory has been used to model such things as nuclear deterrence and war strategy. It’s been applied to animal behavior in regard to natural selection, to human psychology, sociology, and to the development of models of artificial intelligence and cybernetics.

Yet the finite games we play have their moral limitations. Watch a TV show like “Law and Order” and you are likely to see repeated the one called “The Prisoner’s Dilemma” – Two suspects are arrested by the police, who have insufficient evidence for a conviction. Having separated the prisoners, they visit each of them to offer the same deal: if one testifies for the prosecution against the other and the other remains silent, the betrayer goes free and the silent accomplice receives a full, lengthy sentence. If both stay silent, they each go to jail on a much lesser charge. If each betrays the other, each receives a moderate sentence. Each prisoner must make the choice of whether to betray the other or to remain silent. However, neither prisoner knows for sure what choice the other prisoner will make. So this dilemma poses the question: How should each act? Rational self-interest, as this example in game theory demonstrates, can have some fairly unsatisfactory results from a larger point of view. In economics, similar tendencies are apparent. Despite Adam Smith’s “Invisible Hand,” equity for the poor and for the environment can suffer.

Finite games, you see, can exist within infinite games; but not vice versa, says Carse. Rules in a finite game, while it is being played, can't be changed. But an infinite game requires that, if the goal is to keep playing, the rules must be adapted along the way. Finite players win money, or titles or sentences. Infinite players have nothing but their names to contribute to an ongoing narrative. A finite game takes up our time; a sense of participating in a longer, even infinite game, can bring the eternal into the now. The finite player aims to win in life; the infinite player to experience something of the eternal life – perhaps even to escape the cycles of eternal rebirth, as they say in Eastern religion.

Many repetitious patterns in life are the result of playing finite games, over and over. Focus on winning and losing can actually cause repetitions. As President Bush puts it, perhaps we aren't losing in Iraq, but we aren't winning either. And many of us suspect that we are repeating Vietnam. When the more important question might be – what could we be doing so that everyone might live to play another day, another year?

A man loses a job. He learns to live with that loss, and not take it as an ultimate defeat, partly by playing board games with his children, and learning to laugh with them again. A woman wins a promotion, and learns it's NOT true that at the end of the game of life, the one with the most toys – even for her children – wins the game. It is the one who has learned to keep playing well with others.

Those of us who have been trained to win, and to avoid losing, to be impatient to find winning solutions within a finite amount of time, need to remember that it's not a game unless you feel free to walk away from it – and there are ways to step away far short of ending it all. Personally, I applaud the student at Needham High School who this fall told his coach that he was choosing a family vacation over showing up for a game his team was playing. And I boo the coach who said to turn in his uniform; he was off the team.

Like most of us in the West, who have been trained to think only of life's finite games, the coach thought that he had to prove that he was in control. The same thing has been

done by leaders and dictators in every major ideology of the twentieth century, from communism and fascism through free market capitalism and democracy. It's not just about who wins elections, or gets rich, after all. It's about who does some good for the sake of future generations.

As the world grows more interactive and complex, as the number of players continues to grow, the dominance of finite game thinking becomes counter-productive for our species and for our planet. Instead, we need to cultivate the spiritual sense of being continually involved in something more like an infinite game, in which we can't control much at all, where all we can do is make a contribution to a much larger process, and where our goal should be to help others who will come after us to keep the whole game going, if not eternally, then with as many moments as close to the Infinite as it is possible to find within the finite time that is ours.

I have no doubt that some of you are going to use the arbitrary boundary of the New Year to try to make some resolutions, and to start the game of life anew. And that's just fine. Let me say only this: evangelical Christians seem to think that religion is a finite game, one in which the way to win is to be "born again," once and for all. From what I have seen of those who have repented and been born again, I wish they would try to repent and start over more often. Because if life is truly an infinite game, then perhaps we should learn to be born again, and again, and again, and again. Every day; every hour.

A parable¹ to close: Once upon a time there was a great archer, the royal archer, the best living. But he was dissatisfied. He'd set his target a hundred yards away, raised his bow, released the arrow, but as it sailed through the sky, it would encounter the wind. When it fell, it was less than perfectly on target. A few inches to the right, to the left, above or below. The archer was good, but not perfect. He kept looking for places around the country with little wind or uncertainty, so his practice might make him perfect.

One day he came upon a barn. On its side there were twelve targets. And in the precise center of each was an arrow. "This is a greater archer than I am!" the royal archer said.

“Who is he?” But the farmer soon explained that he was being a fool. The archer was his son, a painter. “He shoots the arrow first, then he paints the targets around them!”

The archer was angry that someone would make a mockery of his art, so he demanded to see the son, the painter. The young painter said, “It’s you! The royal archer! The greatest archer alive! Standing here at my house. I’ve admired you all my life!” With each phrase of praise the anger of the archer diminished. The two men sat together under a tree in the yard. “Tell me,” the archer said, “why did you shoot a dozen arrows at the barn and then paint the targets around them?”

“A dozen arrows?” said the young painter. “I shot a hundred arrows! I’m happy when one even hits the barn! When I reached a dozen, I decided to celebrate. I’m not much of an archer, but I am a painter, so I celebrated by painting the most beautiful targets I could.”

The royal archer spent the night at the farmhouse with the old farmer, his wife, and their son, the painter. The next morning the painter and the archer went out together with their bows and quivers – and a box of paint. They stood a hundred yards away from the other side of the barn and the archer showed the painter just how to put his foot forward, how to stand, how to meditate on the target, how to hold and release the arrow. The painter’s arrow rose into the air, descended in a graceful arc, and struck the barn – off to one side. Still he was pleased. Then the royal archer took his shot. There was tiny dot above the barn door that was his target. The arrow rose, encountered a little wind, and struck just inches to the left of the little dot. “If not for the wind, it would have been a perfect hit,” he remarked. “But it was a perfect hit!” said the painter. Who then showed the archer how to paint a perfect target all around it.

This is the kind of story in which you are the target – and you, and you, and you, and me. I hope it hit the mark. In the New Year ahead, may you strive not just to win at the finite games within your life, but to play one infinite game in which the goal is to make a contribution, and to change the rules so that others after us can go on playing.

Happy New Year! Many blessings!

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First Reading

Psalm 90: 10, 12

The days of our years are three score years and ten.
And if by reason of strength they be four score years,
 We are soon cut off, and we fly away. . .
So teach us to number our days,
 That we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Second Reading

Ric Masten

I turned 40 a while ago and came dribblin' out of the locker room,
 ready to start the second half.
Lookin' up at the scoreboard, I noticed we were behind: 7 to 84;
And it occurred to me then, we ain't gonna win!
And considering the score, I beginning to be damn glad
 this particular ain't gonna go on forever.
Now don't take that to mean I'm ready for the showers-
Take it to mean I'm probably gonna play one hell of a 2nd half!
Now I told this to some kids playing in the court next to mine;
 but I don't think they understood.
How could they? Playing in the 1st quarter just 3 points behind.

¹ adapted from a story in the prologue to *The Curse of Blessings: Sometimes the Right Story Can Change Your Life*, by Mitchell Chefitz (Running Press, 2006).