

Playing Down to the Bone

-by Daniel Caron

The children sit at the edge of the mats with eyes of anticipation, each waiting for a turn to come out on the mat to play. At this private K-8 school in southern Connecticut, play is as much a part of the curriculum as reading and math. The mission of the school is to develop well-rounded individuals.

Before we begin our play, my friend and colleague Dr. Fred Donaldson explains what play is and what play is not. Fred coined the term "Original Play" to describe an important relationship that exists between all life. The term also helps to distinguish Original Play from other types of cultural play such as games, sports and having fun.

Fred explains to the children that Original Play "is the courage to practice kindness and safety in all situations." This definition serves the children well although Original Play means so much more. Original Play promotes a relationship, which allows you to move beyond postures of self-defense while maintaining self-esteem and not diminishing the esteem of others. These concepts are difficult for adults to grasp since so much of adult energy is spent on self-defense. To play with others is not a cognitive exercise but rather a daily practice based on the kindness of physical connection, which can be felt right down to the bone.

Years ago when Fred first introduced me to the nomenclature of Original Play he suggested that I look to children and wild animals for lessons in both the understanding and practice of play. In these teachers I discover an understanding of play's original purpose- connection, belonging and trust that escape the eyes, minds and hearts of most adults. Even today, years later, such an understanding seems so simple to a person like me who spent too many years in higher education thereby missing important lessons from the world right in front of me.

I recall my first play experience with a child who is autistic. I sit on the mat in the center of the room at the school for children with special needs. Two teachers walk in with the little boy who immediately sits down to take off his shoes. His presence is like that of a martial arts master preparing for his daily practice. One teacher assists the boy with his shoes while the other walks over to me and whispers in my ear "Be careful; this one bites." My muscles tense as the armor around my body stiffens to ward off any attack. The little boy walks onto the mat and approaches me with a sense of purpose. As my body prepares for the gnawing child he gingerly reaches out to my face, cupping his hands to both of my ears. The boy then draws his face into mine, touching his forehead to my forehead. He holds me there for a few moments, softly releases my face and then walks back to his

teachers and sits down to put his shoes back on. He is done with the lesson for the day.

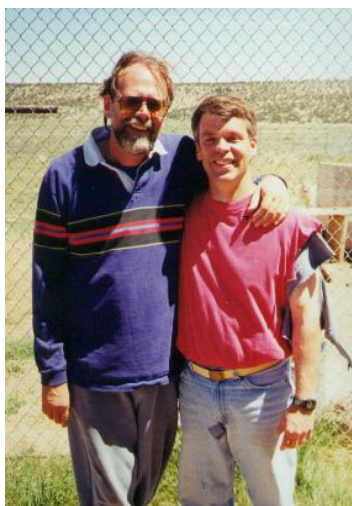
Seconds become minutes as I struggle for the meaning of this gentle introduction. My body softens and my eyes fill with tears as "the boy who bites" exits the room with his teachers. All of the books I read and years of martial arts practice could not teach me what this little boy demonstrated about kindness and trust in the face of uncertainty.

The following summer I visit a wolf and wolf-hybrid research center in New Mexico. Would wolves play with the same clarity and gentleness as the little boy with autism?



My first introduction is with the Ambassador Pack, a three-member group, that is the friendliest of all the packs at the research facility. Upon entering the enclosure, Elwood, the adolescent of the group jumps up, grabs my hair and, in a motion faster than I can see, swings me to the ground and holds me there. Once my shoulders relax he releases his powerful grip on my head and our interactions continue—all of them powerfully gentle. Elwood reminded me that play is about providing consistent messages and how non-verbal messages can be more important than the spoken ones. So often adults verbally tell others that they want to be gentle and kind but their body language or behavior gives a contradictory message.

Later that same afternoon I am introduced to the largest pack at the research facility. As I walk to the gate the research director warns me that people do not go into this enclosure. She is making an exception for me because of my play research but she cannot guarantee my safety with this wild pack of animals. She then tells me what happened to the last man, a repair person, who entered the enclosure to affect repairs on plumbing. By the time he scaled the twelve-foot high fence in the back of the enclosure, the pack had stripped his jeans right off of him. This is not what I need to hear as I enter the facility. My body tenses and I walk in like I am stepping on eggshells. Immediately the alpha male walks up to me, jumps to my shoulder and rips the long sleeve from my shirt. He jumps again and takes the arm from my short-sleeve undershirt while also leaving a long cut down my forearm. Finally, he grabs my knee in his mouth and sinks his left incisor into my upper knee. It is time for me to leave and I exit the enclosure.



Reviewing videotape of the experience it is easy to see the conflicting message I was giving the pack. Despite my relaxed posture while being reprimanded from the alpha male, it was clear that I entered their home projecting the message that it was not safe to be around me. It was also evident that the alpha male could have seriously injured me at any time. His reprimand was simply telling me to pay attention.

Since that important lesson I have shared many gentle and memorable interactions with the alpha male and the other pack members. Two years ago I was asked to film a segment of play for a television program with the wolves and wolf-hybrids at the research center. Two days before my arrival the alpha male died of renal failure. I spent hours on that visit gently interacting with the animals while mourning the spirit of their wonderful leader. The melancholy mood of the pack acknowledged a great absence in their family. The alpha male's death still serves as a reminder to me that we can be fiercely gentle and clear in our interactions with each other. I still feel his lesson in my heart and in my knee.

When you pay attention to the signals and you act from a basis of kindness, you possess the ability to reach out to the world in play. This is my experience with wolves, whales, dolphins, manatees and people. Play gives the message that "you are safe." This communication cuts through all culture-based categories (such as animal, gang member or child with special needs) and sets the foundation for a fundamentally new relationship with the world. It is sometimes challenging making kindness and safety the basis of all interactions but the wonderful models that have lived this important message continue to encourage me. Mother Teresa, Jesus, Gandhi, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. all knew and lived this message of love as the foundation of their relationships. Original Play is nothing more than putting the message of these teachers into daily practice.

It is interesting how much energy we spend in self-defense. This is evident by the practices of people and nations in our world today. Play teaches us to move beyond responses of fight, flight or freezing and the perceived threats we experience. This physiological and psychological shift promotes the safety of the individual and everyone else around that person. Play creates a resiliency that is strong enough to effectively respond to all types of attacks and challenges such as "bully," "conflict," "war" and even "cancer". Play teaches us something we have suspected for so long, the lesson that love is more powerful than fear.

In my work at a shelter for battered women and children I see this resiliency in the children who play. This is not always easy especially for children who have few

roles models of loving-kindness and see touch as the basis of pain and suffering. Play requires courage and these children are incredibly courageous.

The children and I sit around the mat. Some of the faces are new, some are very familiar. Each child takes a turn to come out onto the mat and experience kindness in all of our interactions. This gentleness happens regardless of how upset the child might be or the way the child behaves while on the mat. If the child chooses not to play then the turn passes to the next child. It can sometimes take weeks or months for a child to feel safe enough to come onto the mat.

One four-year-old girl named Beth has passed up each invitation to play for the last six months. I know little about her background but her large eyes and frightened demeanor suggest she has witnessed terrible violence. She probably has little reason to trust any man, even this man who she has seen playing with the other children during the past six months.

On this day she decides to accept an invitation to come onto the mat with her friend. When she is running, jumping on my back and rolling subside for a moment I hear her laughter and look at her face. Her eyes are brighter, her face lighter and I see something that has been noticeably absent in all of our earlier interactions-her smile.

Years of playing with children, adults and wild animals remind me each day that we are all part of the same family. In times of uncertainty, violence and fear I discover that wolves and children, adults and dolphins, all of us, are searching for a sense of safety, love and connection. This sense of belonging is more than simply a cognitive understanding of togetherness. It is something that is felt most deeply within the heart and right down to the bone.

SIDEBAR:

Elements of Original Play (as shared with me by Dr. Fred Donaldson)

Play is the courage to practice kindness and safety in all situations.

1. In play there is no competition
2. Play is manifested by a sequenced pattern of touch that begins with the extremities (hands and feet) and moves up and in on the body. The last place that touch occurs in play is the face and top of the head.
3. Categories or labels (such as whale, dolphin, elderly and special needs) are irrelevant in play
4. There are no revenge responses in play
5. Play is about letting go of fear and learning to trust