



## Playing & Living Joyfully

### About this Faith Practice

In today's world people of all ages need to give themselves permission to play. We believe God seeks to awaken a playful spirit among us. We invite God into this process as we seek recreation and re-creation. While it can lead us into other things, play is inherently its own reward; the experience of playing and living joyfully is – in its essence – pure hope, delight, celebration and song. Playing and living joyfully moves beyond prescribed forms and places. It includes ways of doing justice and moves us outside ourselves into sharing one with another. Joy is contagious; come and play!

### Let's Begin...

Now that you've downloaded the files for your faith practice and age group or setting, you can get started planning one or multiple sessions:

**1** Open the .pdf file for your age group or setting. Choose an Exploration, the approach you think will help your group to best experience the faith practice. Choose any one of the following Explorations to use for one session:



Discovery



Scripture



Discipleship



Christian Tradition



Context and Mission



Future and Vision

**Note:** If you're planning multiple sessions, you can follow the order suggested above or feel free to use any order that fits the needs of your group. Some groups may choose to start with Scripture and then see where that leads them. Others may be more ready to act in their community and might want to start with Context and Mission.

**2** Locate the Exploration you've chosen



**3** Look through all 9 activities and select the ones you would like to do with your group.

- If you're planning a 30–45 minute session, choose 3 activities.
- It is best to select at least one activity from Exploring and Engaging, at least one from Discerning and Deciding, and at least one from Sending and Serving.
- For 45 minutes to 1 hour, choose 4 or 5 activities.

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- For a 1½ to 2-hour session, you can use all 9 activities.

**Tip:** Look for this symbol  to find activities designed for Easy Preparation (able to be done with minimal preparation using supplies normally found at the church).

- 4 Make copies of any handouts () related to your activities. Order posters () if using art (see “Ordering Posters,” below).

### Use of Art, Music, and Scripture in Faith Practices

Faith Practices activities include many opportunities to grow in faith through the use of scripture, music, and art.

#### Ordering Posters

If you choose activities that use an art image, you or your church will need to purchase posters of the art by clicking on the link provided in the activity. If you wish to use art, you will need to plan ahead, since it takes 1 to 2 weeks for the posters to arrive after you place your order.

#### Art

Six posters are used with the faith practice Playing and Living Joyfully and may be ordered by clicking on the links provided.

#### **From Imaging the Word Poster Sets:**

“Allerheiligen” (All Saints) by Wassily Kandinsky (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>)

“Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>)

“Shotgun, Third Ward #1” by John Biggers (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources1>)

#### **From AllPosters.com:**

“Children Play in the Old Town of Kabul, Afghanistan” (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters10>)

“Joyful Dance” by Diana Ong (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters11>)

“Dancing ‘Til Dawn” by Marianne Millar (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters12>)

#### Music

Three music selections are used with Playing and Living Joyfully. We have selected music which is easily found in many hymnals. A web link is provided to give more information about each music selection.

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You, Tune: Hymn to Joy (<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>)

Say it Sing it, (Sing! Prayer and Praise! #188) (<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong11>)

Over My Head, Tune: African-American traditional

(Lyrics: <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12> YouTube: <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12a>)

### Scripture

Twelve Bible passages are used with Playing and Living Joyfully, two with each Exploration.

Discovery	1 John 1:1 – 2:2	Psalm 30
Scripture	Mark: 9:30-37	Philippians 2:1-13
Discipleship	Galatians 4:4-7	Revelation 7:9-17
Christian Tradition	Isaiah 11:1-10	Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Context and Mission	John 12:20-36	Luke 1:39-56
Future and Vision	Mark 16:1-8	Psalm 112

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# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Discovery

### About this Setting

Modern society is fraught with stress and responsibility. The world around us applauds multitasking and encourages us—either directly or implicitly—to neglect our families and friends, even our own souls, in the quest for success and affirmation. We forget to play, and we lose touch with the joy we once had in our relationships and in our connection with the divine. This resource offers activities and encouragement designed to help us find new connections with God and with our loved ones. Through playfulness and joy we increase our awareness of God’s presence in our individual lives, our circles of family and friends, and our interactions in the workplace, school, or community activities. As we find ways to discover joy and learn anew how to play, we reconnect with God and with our own inner selves.

Spiritual transformation is not something that “just happens,” nor is it a one-time event, or an experience that occurs only within the walls of the church. If we are to live into the fullness of our relationship with God, we need to be intentional about it. We need to bring spiritual awareness into all our circles of influence—our individual lives, families and friends, and the larger realm of work, school, or community. This is not religion, but reality—the kind of connection with God that permeates everything around us and makes us come alive.

## About this Exploration

Playing and living joyfully is a legitimate expression of our connection with the divine. Living in joy does not require a particular time or place. It requires a willingness to divest ourselves of the expectations society has imposed upon us. To uncover holy joy in our lives, we must find a place of centering and spontaneity. We allow ourselves to return to what has been present in us since birth: the innate wonder, abandon, and delight of life in relationship with God.

**BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:**  
**1 John 1:1-2:2**  
**Psalm 30**

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

### Leader Preparation

Place information about these practices in your church newsletter, e-mail, and website postings. Include the following, edited to meet the individual needs of your congregation: "A personal exploration of Playing and Living Joyfully is available through our Faith Practices resources. These activities may enable you to play and live joyfully in your personal life, in family and home life, and in your community and work life."

#### 1 A Poem of Joy

**Supplies:**

- pens or pencils
- paper

Gather your family together and use this simple activity to become more aware of the joy available to us every day. Write down four ordinary experiences that make you smile or laugh—hearing a bird sing, feeling the touch of a partner’s hand, watching a child play, receiving an e-mail from a friend. Then write down three sights you like to see in nature, three colors, and three sounds. Read the poem below, letting everyone fill in the blanks, and use this simple poem as a daily reminder of God’s joyful presence in your life.

When I \_\_\_\_\_ , joy is there.  
 When I \_\_\_\_\_ , joy is there.  
 When I \_\_\_\_\_ , joy is there.  
 When I \_\_\_\_\_ , joy is there.

Joy is all around me in \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ .  
 Joy wells up within me in \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ .  
 Joy overflows to others in \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ .

*Where joy is, there is God. Where God is, there is joy. God, help me to remember, to wake up, and to see.*

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 2 Glass Half Full

**Supplies:**

- several small juice glasses (they should be real glass, not plastic)
- water
- different colors of food coloring

Fill the juice glasses with different levels of water so that when you strike them with a spoon, each glass sounds a different musical tone. Experiment with the levels until it sounds right.

Color the different “notes” with food coloring so that each is a different bright color. Then place the glasses on a plate or small tray in the center of your table.



When your family gathers for a meal, use the “chimes” as a call to grace, or as “attention” music when a family member has something to share. Pass the spoon around, let everyone chime, and share something fun or joyful that happened during the day.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### ③ Leaf Play

**Supplies:**

- rake
- pile of autumn leaves
- small basket or paper bag

With a few friends or members of your family, go out into your yard or to a park and rake up a large pile of leaves. Fall into the leaves, kick them, have a leaf fight (like a snowball fight, only warmer). Enjoy the beauty of the day and the company of those you love.

Then issue a challenge: Each person has one minute to dive into the pile and come up with the most beautiful leaf. When everyone has chosen a leaf, circle up and spend a moment or two looking at one another’s leaves and thanking God for being so colorful and creative. Collect the leaves in your bag or basket, take them home, and use them as a fall arrangement on your table. When you see them, they’ll remind you of the simple joy of jumping into a leaf pile, and the creative God who made those leaves to fall.

If you live somewhere where there are no fall leaves, adapt this activity to playing in sand, building sand castles, and finding shells, or collect pine cones and make pine cone creatures.

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity



### ④ Candle in the Dark (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- candle
- match
- Bible

Set aside quiet time during an hour of darkness (early morning or night).

**Consider:** In our modern society, those of us who live in or near cities can barely see stars because of light pollution. We no longer live by the movements of sun and moon, darkness and light. Instead, we create light for ourselves whenever we need it.

Get alone in a room, early morning or late at night, and sit with your candle on a table nearby. Read 1 John 1:1–2:2 and think about what it means that “God is light, and in God is no darkness at all.” Have you ever been in complete darkness, where you couldn’t see anything? What is your gut level response to the idea of that kind of darkness?

Turn out the light. Sit quietly in the dark for a few moments. Listen to the sound of your own breathing. Center yourself in the darkness. Make friends with the dark. When you’re ready, light the candle. Notice how a single flickering candle dispels the darkness and creates a circle of warmth and light around you, and a feeling of safety. Watch the flame. Let it bring you into an awareness of God’s presence with its beauty and simplicity.

Thank God for being present both in the darkness and in the light.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 5 Earth’s Crammed with Heaven

**Supplies:** None

Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.  
—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, from “Aurora Leigh”

Get in a quiet place by yourself, or take a brief walk during your lunch hour. Spend time today considering: How is “every common bush afire with God”? What do you see around you in nature that brings you joy and brings you closer to the divine? How can you become more consistently awake and alive to the presence of God in the world?

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 6 Joy in the Morning

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Get alone in a place where you won’t be disturbed for 15 minutes and read Psalm 30 out loud. As you read, think about the ways that God has come to you when you were “weeping in the night” and brought you “joy in the morning.” Speak those events out loud, thanking God for being present in the midst of those transitions.

When you get to the last verse, read it over and over until you begin to feel the joy of the passage in your body. Let the rhythms of the poem move you, and think about the ways God has turned your own mourning into dancing. Get up, raise your hands, and repeat the last verse out loud. Move with the beat, and dance your gratefulness in whatever way seems natural for you. An alternative is to hand dance: remain seated, and close your eyes. Begin to move a hand in a

rhythm—either responding to some music, or naturally and on its own. Try to let go of your thoughts, and invite your hand to go where it wants, and with the rhythm it wants. Add your other hand when you are comfortable.

In either of these activities realize, as you offer this praise, that God is dancing with you.

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 7 Random Attitudes of Kindness

**Supplies:**

- an hour of uninterrupted time
- journal

Go by yourself to a local coffee shop or restaurant. Take a journal with you. Sit in a location where you can observe others coming and going.

As you watch people and listen to bits of their conversation, try to envision the way Jesus might see them. If someone is rude or rushed, consider what kind of difficult day or hard life experience might contribute to that attitude. Watch to see how others respond as well. Let your imagination spin out possible scenarios for the lives of the people you encounter. Ask yourself how you might respond if you faced similar challenges. Write your observations in your journal. What questions come to your mind? What is God saying to you through the people you see? What is God calling you to do or be?

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 8 The Fun Stairs

**Supplies:**

- <http://www.tinyurl.com/yg9zbb2>

Watch this video and think about what motivates people to “do the right thing.” How can you find fun and joy in the daily necessities of your own life? Identify one change you can make in your daily routine to bring more joy to yourself and to those around you.

## Sending & Serving Activity

#### 9 Sticks and Stones

**Supplies:**

- several palm-sized, smooth-surfaced stones (If stones are not readily available, gather several sticks, 8–10” long, and large enough in diameter to write on.)
- a set of multicolored permanent markers (fine tip or medium)



In today's society we often confuse joy with happiness. Happiness is an emotional reaction that comes and goes with the tide. When we're successful, or financially stable, or experience a moment of affirmation, or buy something we've wanted, we may feel happy for a brief moment. But the feeling can dissipate as quickly as it comes, and leave us empty and wanting more.

Real joy is deeper and more lasting. It comes from our spiritual center and has its source in God. Real joy is not dependent upon external measures of success, affirmation, or acceptance. It's a connection with God and others and the universe—and even our own selves—that nurtures us from within and enables us to see God's presence all around us.

This activity is designed to help identify the "little joys" in life and share them in a meaningful way with the people we care about. You can do this once, weekly, or daily. However often you do it, it can become spiritual practice that connects God's natural world with the significant people in your life.

Take a walk—in the woods, near a creek, wherever you find yourself. Not a power walk or a cardio exercise, but a stroll in nature, with the leisure to look around you and enjoy the little things. As you walk, think about someone you care about—a life partner, parent, child, friend, or coworker. Think of one or two words that encapsulate that person's significance in your life—it might be something as simple as "blessed," or "friend," or as intimate as "lifelong love."

On your walk, pick up a stone (small enough to carry, but large enough and smooth enough to write on). If you can't find stones, gather sticks suitable for writing on. When you get home, wash and dry the stone, or strip the bark from the stick, then write your word on it with one of your multicolored markers.

Let yourself go—be artistic. Decorate it with flowers or a tree or whatever comes to mind. Have fun. Be a child. Don't worry about whether it's perfect.

When you're finished, take the risk to give the rock to the person who inspired it. Chances are he or she will keep it forever.

## Reflect

Plato said, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." What do you think he meant? Do you think this is true? Why is play so revealing of our inner selves?

# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Scripture

### About this Setting

The Bible offers us many images of godly play and divine joy. Some of them have to do with the way we perceive, love, and worship God. Some reflect our human relationships of love, friendship, work, and social interaction. If we are to be true to the divine spark within us, we need to recognize that God blesses our play and desires that we live in joy and abundance.

Sometimes we get so caught up in questions and details about the Bible that we forget to look for our own stories in its pages. God calls us to find ourselves in the divine story, to connect with the principles and practices we discover there. When we concern ourselves less with being “right” in what we believe, we can begin to find new truths in the stories of the sacred text.

### About this Exploration

The history of our faith, recorded in scripture, is a tale of human beings who, like us, wrestled with doubt, oppression, and sorrow. Yet this story is rooted in a creation that God proclaimed good, and undergirded with the joy that comes from the assurance of God’s faithfulness, forgiveness, and healing. This story, which is our story of salvation, invites us to creative imagination and to finding our own part in the “play.”

**BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:**  
**Mark 9:30–37**  
**Philippians 2:1–13**

## Leader Preparation

Place information about these practices in your church newsletter, e-mail, and website postings. Include the following, edited to meet the individual needs of your congregation: “A personal exploration of Playing and Living Joyfully is available through our Faith Practices resources. These activities may enable you to play and live joyfully in your personal life, in family and home life, and in your community and work life.”

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### ① Singing in the Rain

**Supplies:**

- Miriam Therese Winter’s song “Joy Is Like the Rain”; Listen to the song and read the words at <http://www.tinyurl.com/39jg8of>.
- Bible

As grownups we often image joy as the sunshine, when everything seems easy and things are going our way. When the rain comes, either literally or figuratively, we grumble and complain and use words like dreary and gray and boring. In Philippians 2, however, Paul connects joy not with external circumstances, but with what’s going on inside us—with loving one another, looking out for one another’s interests, being of the same mind, having the mind of Christ. In a similar way, Miriam Therese Winter images joy as the rain and the clouds and the storm. Whatever comes our way, Christ is with us in the midst of it, always present, always faithful.

Pick a warm day, dress in old clothes, and go out with someone special—your spouse or partner, your child, or a special friend—for a walk in the rain. Take off your shoes. Feel the rain on your skin. Stick out your tongue and taste the raindrops. Don’t try to shield yourself, but welcome the water and rejoice in it. Notice the designs the drops make in pools and puddles. Watch how the grass and plants respond to the rain. Listen to the sound of it. Smell the freshness in the air. Shake your hair and let the drops fly. Tilt back your head and watch how it comes down from the clouds. Stomp in the puddles the way you did when you were a child. Splash each other. Laugh a lot, and imagine God laughing along with you.

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### ② Living into the Questions

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- pens or pencils
- slips of paper

Read aloud Mark 9:30–37. Verse 32 says that the disciples had no idea what Jesus was talking about, but they were afraid to ask him. Then later, in verse 37, Jesus uses a little child as his image of welcoming the divine.

Children aren’t afraid to ask questions. Until they’re trained to behave like adults, they’re not worried about looking stupid, or not having the answers already, or being humiliated by their lack of sophistication. They’ll ask anything: “Why is the sky blue?” “Why can’t you tickle yourself?” “Why does a dog have black lips?”

If you could ask God anything, what might your question be? Have everyone in the family circle write down their questions on slips of paper and put them into a basket. Then use those questions to generate conversation around the dinner table. And remember, coming to “the right answer” doesn’t matter nearly as much as having a meaningful discussion.

### 3 Movie Night: *X-Men*

**Supplies:**

- DVD of the movie *X-Men*. See more info at <http://www.tinyurl.com/bvcp5>
- popcorn
- soft drinks

Watch the movie with family or friends. As you watch, think about those people who have been (or still are) outcasts in our society today. Many of the mutants feel the need to hide, or even more radically, to “be cured.” What are the parallels today? How do you think Jesus would respond to the mutants in the movie? What is the difference between Magneto’s leadership among the mutants and Dr. Xavier’s leadership? Where do you find spiritual truth in the film? How can we learn to celebrate diversity and welcome differences as part of God’s infinite creation?

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

### 4 Embracing the Inner Child (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- pen
- journal

As adults, many of us have a hard time connecting with the childlike joy and wonder we once experienced. Or we may have had a difficult childhood and can’t remember much joy. Either way, this activity can help reconnect us with the childlikeness inside us, and come to new insights about living and playing joyfully.

Journal for fifteen minutes, writing with your nondominant hand. (If you’re right-handed, for example, write with your left hand, and don’t worry about it being “messy.”) Allow your adult self to recede into the background, and let your child self come to the fore. Chances are you’ll become aware of some of those feelings and emotions you thought were lost.

Choose one or more of the following starters:

- The best thing about being a kid is . . .
- What I always wanted to do is . . .
- The best present I ever got was . . .
- When I grow up, I want to . . .
- It makes me happy when . . .
- I can’t help laughing when . . .
- I had a great dream about . . .
- I know I’m loved because . . .

When you've finished with the exercise, switch back to your dominant hand and record your emotional responses to the experience.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 5 The Mind of Christ

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read Philippians 2:1–13. If you have several different translations available, see what each one says. Read the whole passage, then come back again and focus on the first few verses. What does it mean to have the same mind that was in Christ? How do you go about regarding others as better than yourself?

Next, think about your circle of acquaintances—at home, at work, at church, wherever you find yourself. Are there one or two people in that group who irritate you, or always rub you the wrong way? Can you think of people you avoid, simply because they tend to be annoying?

What might be going on in their lives that makes them oblivious to the way others perceive them? Create a scenario in your mind of what might make them act that way. Perhaps someone is fighting with a spouse or dealing with rebellious teenagers or facing a doctor's appointment to find out if he or she has cancer. Perhaps someone is dealing with an elderly parent with Alzheimer's, or a child with ADHD. It doesn't matter if it's fact or fiction; what matters is that you realize that the annoying person might be struggling with issues you can only imagine.

Plato said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." Sounds like something Jesus would agree with.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 6 Coloring Prayer

**Supplies:**

- blank paper
- crayons or colored pencils

One quality we can lose as we grow up is the ability to give ourselves over to play without worrying about how we look or how well we're doing. In this activity we're not going to be artists. We're going to pray with color.

Don't worry about creating a pretty picture, or even drawing something that anyone else can identify. Just use the paper as a prayer mat and colors instead of words. Pick a color that speaks to you. Draw whatever image or motion comes into your mind. Enjoy yourself. Let yourself go. Let the crayons form an abstract, multicolored prayer of gratitude and joy and thankfulness.

Words aren't necessary; God understands the language of the heart.

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 7 Who Is the Greatest? (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- 15–30 minutes of uninterrupted time

In Mark 9:30–37, the disciples argue among themselves about who is the greatest. Jesus shut down the discussion with his characteristic upside-down theology: If you want to be first, be last. If you want to be great, be the servant of all.

Put yourself in a place where you can watch people without being obtrusive: a coffee shop or small cafe, a park, a bench in a bus station or subway. Observe the way others come and go, and how they treat one another in their daily interactions. Can you identify those who think they're important? How do they walk and talk? How do they respond when someone gets in their way or slows them down? How do other people respond to them?

Do you see others who particularly emanate gentleness and kindness, or helpfulness? What kind of body language do they demonstrate? Whom do they show kindness to? How visible are they in the crowd? And what response do they get from those around them?

What, in your opinion, is the payoff for being last instead of first?

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 8 Sharing the Pie

**Supplies:**

- pen
- journal

In modern society, we're often trained to think in terms of winners and losers. We assume that every life situation is finite, that "more for you = less for me." Accordingly we tend to focus on getting the biggest piece of the pie: the largest raise, the most praise, the lion's share of the credit for a job well done. Jesus' way, however, is the way of the servant: "The last shall be first, and the first, last."

What would happen if we took that "upside-down" theology into real life—into the family and the church and the workplace? What would happen if we simply decided we weren't going to compete any more, that we weren't going to play the game of one-upmanship?

Make a list of people you've felt competitive toward—people you've wanted to best. It might be your spouse, your parent, even your own child. It might be a sibling or a friend, a coworker or a boss. Be as honest as you can about what kind of competitive urges you have felt, and how you wanted to "beat" them, to win the argument, to prove yourself right.

Now turn your thinking upside-down. Instead of focusing on what you want and



how to get it, think about what your competition wants, and how you can help them achieve their goals. Be very specific. What can you do for your spouse or partner that would make your home life easier and less stressful? How can you show appreciation for your parents, children, siblings, or friends? What can you do to help your boss accomplish her mission, or to help a coworker get ahead? How can you contribute to positive energy and gratitude in your home or workplace?

Choose one action to take this week, and keep the list on hand for later. Write about your responses. How does it feel to be a catalyst instead of a competitor?

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 9 Ten-Minute Drive Time

**Supplies:** None

Emerson said, “Life is a journey, not a destination.” And yet many of us are in a hurry most of the time. We’re late because we think our schedule is more important than everyone else’s, or because we try to cram in one more “vital” phone call or e-mail before we leave for that appointment. We then end up rushed, fried, and frazzled. This activity is designed to help us slow down, take a breath, center ourselves, and enjoy the journey.

Wherever you’re going—to work, to school, to run errands—leave ten minutes earlier than you ordinarily would. Turn off the radio and open the window. Feel the wind on your skin. Hang your arm out the driver’s side of the car the way your dad did when you were young. Slow down. Breathe. Sing. Pray. Take a back road. Look at the sky, the trees, the sun and shadow (or the rain and clouds). Smell the air.

Be patient. Be polite. Wait, and motion that person in who’s so antsy to get in line ahead of you. If someone’s crawling up your tailpipe, pull over and let them go on by. Smile and wave. Don’t let your own temperature be controlled by someone else’s thermostat.

Learning to go slow can become a spiritual practice. It can put us in touch with our true selves and with God, and shield us from the frantic demands of a world that’s spinning out of control. In the whole scope of time and eternity, ten minutes is a grain of salt in the ocean; but for this moment, on this day, it can make a world of spiritual difference, both for you and for those around you.

## Reflect

“We are most nearly ourselves when we achieve the seriousness of a child at play.” —*Heraclitus*

Do you think this is true? How can we as adults experience the utter abandonment of a child at play? What gets in the way of that kind of joy?

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# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Discipleship

### About this Setting

We often speak (or think) about following Jesus as if it's a commitment to somberness and even misery. Did Jesus play? Did Jesus laugh? Did Jesus have a sense of humor? What kind of life can we expect our commitment to Christ to offer us? These activities will help bring us to a place of greater understanding about what it means to live in an awareness of God's presence with us on a daily basis.

Discipleship is not all about discipline and order and marching in formation. It's about following the way of Jesus, learning to live and relate in a way that deepens our connections with God, with others, with ourselves, and with the created world. When we learn to play and live joyfully, we discover a more benevolent universe, where burdens are lifted, and we can breathe and laugh and love.

### About this Exploration

In the Exploration of discipleship we focus on play as an experience of taking turns, learning every position on the field—from goalie to coach, from forward to cheering fan. In discipleship there are no benchwarmers. In Christian community all experience the amazing joy of Special Olympics, as each participant is embraced at the finish line by Jesus Christ.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Galatians 4:4-7**  
**Revelation 7:9-17**

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### Leader Preparation

Place information about these practices in your church newsletter, e-mail, and website postings. Include the following, edited to meet the individual needs of your congregation: "A personal exploration of Playing and Living Joyfully is available through our Faith Practices resources. These activities may enable you to play and live joyfully in your personal life, in family and home life, and in your community and work life."



#### 1 Meandering with Jesus (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- nothing but time

We live in a society that is nearly obsessive about productivity—how much can you accomplish, how well can you juggle, how good are you at multitasking? Even our Sabbaths are filled with agendas and to-do lists. We've always got a project on the back burner, something hanging over our heads demanding our attention. Rarely do we ever simply *be* with the people we love—not doing something or accomplishing something, but simply living.

Jesus was pretty good at *being*. He didn't seem to mind being interrupted or waylaid. He often just went off by himself in the boat or up in the hills. He didn't have MapQuest or directions from AAA. He just walked and talked and laughed and met people wherever they happened to be.

Take an hour or two on a Saturday afternoon. Get in the car with someone you love. Find a back road, country lane, or scenic drive. See what's down that road you always wondered about. Stop and get out; feel the wind on your face and listen to the quietness. Hold hands. Smile at each other. Think about the ways you might simplify and streamline your life so that you'd have more time for your own soul and for God and for the people you love.

Find joy in the simple things. Life's a journey, not a destination. You don't always have to be going somewhere.

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 2 Becoming Real

**Supplies:**

- children's book *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. You can access a copy of the full text and illustrations online at <http://www.tinyurl.com/4as2c>

Gather your family and read the story out loud. When you've finished, talk about the story. What parts of the tale are most moving or significant? What kind of spiritual truth does the story communicate?

Think about the following interchange between the Velveteen Rabbit and the Skin Horse:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

What does it mean that “once you’re loved, you can never be ugly except to those who don’t understand”? What does this say about your relationship with God? Does it give you a different perspective about priorities?

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 3 Movie Night: *Shrek*

**Supplies:**

- DVD of the movie *Shrek* (the original). More info at <http://www.tinyurl.com/9pypo>
- popcorn
- soft drinks

Watch the movie together in your home. (Note: In order to watch it in a public place, such as your church, you will need a license.) In many ways it is a classic fairy tale—a princess being rescued from the entrapment of an evil spell by the power of love. But this story has some significant twists. What kind of “hero” is Shrek? How does he change over the course of the tale? What does this story communicate about the power of love? What spiritual lessons do you find in the tale?

## Individual and Personal Life Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

### 4 Three Wishes

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- pen
- journal

In modern society we give a lot of thought and effort to inheritance. We want to make sure our loved ones are provided for, to leave behind an inheritance that will support them when we are gone. Some of us even measure our own worthiness by what we leave behind: “The one who dies with the most toys wins.”

Galatians 4:4–7 speaks of us as God’s children and heirs. If we are God’s heirs, what kind of inheritance might we expect from the Holy One? What do we want God to hand down to us?

In 1 Kings 3, the Bible tells the story of Solomon being asked this very question. God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, “Ask anything, and I will give it to you.” Rather like Aladdin with the genie: three wishes, anything you want.

We know from all the stories, of course, that it’s a trick question. Being given whatever you ask for can turn horribly wrong. But Solomon doesn’t fall into the trap. He asks God for wisdom, for the ability to be able to govern the people well.

If God were to give you anything you asked for, what would you desire?

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 5 The Beat of a Different Drummer

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- a drum, if you have one or can borrow one: an African djembe, or bongos, or any kind of hand drum; otherwise use a large soup pot and a couple of wooden spoons.

Find a place by yourself, where your drumming won’t disturb anyone else or make you self-conscious.

Read Revelation 7:9–17. Then come back and read it a second time, out loud. Go back for a third reading, this time focusing on verses 9–12. Read it loud, with great emphasis, as if you were an actor onstage trying to be heard in the back row of the auditorium. Listen to the rhythms of the passage, particularly the song of the angels in verse 12:

Bles-sing and glo-ry and wis-dom and thanks-giv-ing,  
Hon-or and pow-er and might  
Be to our God for-ev-er and e-ver

As you fix the rhythms in your head, begin to beat the drum. It doesn’t matter if you feel foolish or think you have no idea what you’re doing. Just beat the drum. Repeat the words. Take off your shoes. Feel the pounding and pulsing of the drumbeat in your body. Let it connect you to the earth, and to heaven. Let it resonate within you. Let it be your prayer, your praise, with your hands and voice and body. Have fun and let yourself rejoice.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 6 Kandinsky's "All Saints"

**Supplies:**

- fifteen minutes of Internet time

Set aside any preconceived notion that you don't like or can't understand modern art. Then call up this link on your computer: <http://www.tinyurl.com/3784hym>.

This painting is "Allerheiligen," or "All Saints," by the Russian artist and philosopher Wassily Kandinsky. In the course of his long and diverse artistic career, Kandinsky painted several interpretations of "All Saints," and wrote a fascinating treatise on spirituality in art. (If you'd like to see the whole text, go to <http://www.tinyurl.com/2qyx8x>.)

Spend a few minutes looking at the details of Kandinsky's painting. What parts of it particularly speak to you? What kinds of "saints" does the painting depict? What parts of it bring you joy? What parts make you think? Why do you think the painting runs off the canvas onto the frame? What does that say to you about Kandinsky's view of holy joy in everyday life?

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

### 7 Vivaldi's Four Seasons (Easy Preparation)

**Supplies:**

- computer with Internet access

Call up the following link on YouTube: Spring: <http://www.tinyurl.com/cg9ecr>. It is recommended that you open the file in a separate window and maximize the size for optimum immersion in the music and visual images. As you watch and listen, think about the widely diverse beauty God has created in the world. Let your soul swell with the music. Become aware of the divine in the creativity of Vivaldi, the artists and photographers, and the editor who put together the music with the visual effects. Take the experience with you through your day, share it with someone else, and express your gratitude to God for the beauty in your world.

If you'd like to experience the music and visual images for the other seasons, here are the links:

Summer: <http://www.tinyurl.com/d6mgys>

Autumn: <http://www.tinyurl.com/nhobgg>

Winter: <http://www.tinyurl.com/ybwk4p3>



## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 8 The “I Like You” List

**Supplies:**

- pen
- journal
- some small note cards

Most of us spend a great deal of our time with the same people. We see them every day, we speak to them, we interact with them at varying levels of emotional intimacy. But how often do we take the time to tell them what we like about them, and to thank them for being part of our lives?

Make a list of the people you see and speak to every week. This would include family members, close friends, coworkers, church acquaintances, maybe even the clerk at the gas station or the produce manager at the grocery store. Write down their names, and beside each name, write one thing you like about this person, one attribute that makes you smile.

Mother Teresa said, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.” The reverse is also true: If you love them, you have no time to judge them.

You may be surprised at some of the qualities that come out in your list. Even if the people in your life drive you crazy, nag you half to death, or irritate you by the way they chew gum, you can find at least one positive attribute to focus on. And when you focus on the positive, you have less room for the negative that comes out in your own criticism. Positive energy generates positive energy.

Once you have your list, keep it nearby. Choose one person on the list—the one whose name jumps out at you. Take time to write a brief note to say thanks for whatever small or large joy that person has brought into your life. This should not be an e-mail, but a handwritten note to be mailed or delivered in person.

Do it once or twice a week, for however long it takes you to get through your list. By the time you’ve finished your “I Like You” list, you’ll like yourself a whole lot better. Your cup of joy will be overflowing, and you’ll understand why loving God and loving others are the two great principles of spiritual life.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 9 Thankfulness Banner

**Supplies:**

- old white flat (not fitted) sheet
- water-based tempera paints in primary colors
- some inexpensive paint brushes of varying sizes

You can do this activity with almost any group of people: at camp, Vacation Bible School, a family reunion, an office picnic, a church cookout, or a summer mission trip.

Cut the sheet into large rectangles. A full or queen-size sheet will make four nice large banners. You can buy inexpensive used sheets at places like Goodwill, Salvation Army, Habitat Stores, or a thrift store.

Mix the colors of paint in separate disposable plastic tubs. (In case you've forgotten coloring lessons from kindergarten: red + yellow = orange; yellow + blue = green; red + blue = purple; red + yellow + blue = brown.)

Get everyone involved, children and adults alike. Paint the words, "Thank You, God" across the top of the banner, and then let everyone put a painted handprint on the banner, along with their names and a word or image of thankfulness.

Have fun. Laugh a lot. Get paint in your hair. And when you're done, hang the banner where everyone can enjoy it. This is graffiti at its finest, the poetry of the everyday, the art of daily life.

## Reflect

"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." —*George Bernard Shaw*

What does this reflection mean to you? In what ways have you "grown old" because you stopped playing, or stayed young because you kept on playing? What kind of play most brings you into a deeper connection with the divine?

# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Christian Tradition

### About this Setting

For those of us who have experience in the church, we may find that our traditions limit—or even hinder—a genuine expression of godly playfulness and joy. These activities are designed to help us recapture that joy, and to discover new ways of being that can help us keep in touch with the daily joy that God desires for us to have.

Sometimes we forget that God wants us to have a healthy, happy, fulfilling life, and we buy into the image of God as a cosmic killjoy and faith as drudgery. But Christian tradition isn't all about rules and dogma—it's about joyful, abundant living in an awareness of the presence of God.

### About this Exploration

Christian tradition comes from many places and cultures throughout the world. We learn to play and live joyfully from the traditions of communities who have lived through persecution: Christians in the catacombs, the early reformers, Africans who were enslaved, people in same gender loving relationships, immigrant-based faith groups, and others. We learn in new ways—to party, to dance, to eat, to sing, to talk, and to celebrate with our whole being.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:  
**Isaiah 11:1–10**  
**Song of Solomon 2:8–13**

## Leader Preparation

Place information about these practices in your church newsletter, e-mail, and website postings. Include the following, edited to meet the individual needs of your congregation: “A personal exploration of Playing and Living Joyfully is available through our Faith Practices resources. These activities may enable you to play and live joyfully in your personal life, in family and home life, and in your community and work life.”

## Household and Family Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 1 Bell Chimes

**Supplies:**

- a sturdy branch from the garden
- narrow fabric ribbon in bright colors
- small brass bells from your local craft store
- brass safety pins

This activity will encourage you and your family to remember the importance of the little things in life. For a week or two, as you gather for meals or other family time, take a few minutes to talk about little things that have been meaningful to you: a kind word from a stranger, a butterfly on your windshield, the peaceful sound of rain on the roof. For each “tiny blessing” your family identifies, pin a bell on a ribbon and tie it to the branch. Make the ribbons different lengths and varied colors.

Then hang the chime on a porch or in a window where the wind will catch it and make the bells ring. Every time you hear it, you will be reminded of how God comes to us in small and unobtrusive ways, and how much joy we can find in those little things.

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 2 Movie Night: *Pleasantville*

**Supplies:**

- DVD of the movie *Pleasantville*
- popcorn
- soft drinks

Gather your family or friends at your home and watch the movie together. Reality can be messy and uncomfortable. Sometimes we long for a perfect world, where everything runs smoothly and no one rocks the boat. What does this movie say about the relative value of “perfection” versus “reality”? In what artistic ways does the film represent joy in our individual and community lives?

When the two teenagers in the movie suddenly find themselves inside the perfect world of Pleasantville, they get the chance to start over, to remake themselves in a different image. If you had that opportunity, what would you change about yourself? How can you begin to make those changes now, in the real world?

What is so important about color in this movie? What does color represent, and how does color both enrich and stir up the community of Pleasantville? What does this say to you about being alive and awake to God in the world? Where do you find spiritual connections in this movie? What parts touch you most deeply, and why?

## Sending & Serving Activity

### ③ Prayers on the Wind

**Supplies:**

- kites
- kite string
- small pieces of cloth
- permanent markers

When the storms of life begin to blow, we have two choices: to hunker down and give in to fear, or to get out the kites.

In this activity, a kite becomes an image of wonder—that high-flying feeling when you soar on the wind and have the absolute certainty that someone is holding your string and will not let you fall. Are you struggling with financial, emotional, or spiritual issues in your life or with your family? Illness? Depression? Loss of hope? Write those needs on a small piece of cloth, tie them to the kite’s tail as a visible prayer, and let the wind take them heavenward.

You can buy inexpensive kites online, or you can make your own. Take time on a Saturday to go to the local schoolyard, beach, or park, and fly the kite with your family or friends. And then, when your day of kite-flying is over, hang the kite as a decoration on a porch or deck, as a reminder of the joy that comes with play, and of the prayers that have been lifted to heaven on the wind.

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

### ④ Barefooting

**Supplies:**

- a warm day and a patch of grass or stretch of beach

When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he was told: “Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground.”

One of the creation stories in Genesis describes human life as being sculpted from the clay of the earth. Whatever we believe about creation or evolution, the metaphor holds true: we are connected to the earth.

The problem is, many of us have lost that connection with the onset of “progress.” We no longer get dirt under our nails planting our own gardens. Some of us go for weeks or months, even years, without having any direct contact with the earth. We wear shoes. We walk on sidewalks. We drive. We avoid sloshing around in dirt and mud and snow and rain.

Yet there are blessings to be found in reconnection with the earth. Take off your shoes. Spend fifteen minutes walking on lush grass or a sandy beach, or even with mud squishing up between your toes. Make a connection with the earth beneath you. Think about how you are a part of that earth, created from the same elements, your molecules merging with the molecules of all creation. Feel the

thrumming rhythms of the earth beneath your feet, like a giant heartbeat. Whisper a prayer of thanks to the sun that warms you, the wind that cools you, the leaves that make music in the breeze and send out oxygen for you to breathe. Whisper a prayer of thanks to the God who offers such gifts.

Option for wintertime: Walk in the snow, if possible, or in the cold winter air. Breathe in, and notice the tingle of cold air in your nose, throat, and lungs. Breathe out, and notice the pattern of your breath clouds. Make a snowball, or a snow model of a person or animal, or an ice sculpture. Stop and look at things like leaves and twigs.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 5 Centering: Creative Idleness

**Supplies:**

- journal
- pen

Modern life tends to be frazzled and fractured. We try to accomplish too much in too little time, we cram each day with a to-do list, and we feel guilty if we take time for quiet reflection. The church hasn't always helped. Most of us grew up hearing quasi-religious proverbs:

*"Idle hands are the devil's workshop."*

*"Idleness rusts the mind."*

*"Go to the ant, thou sluggard. Learn her ways and be wise."*

What the old adages don't tell us is that sometimes the most important path toward spiritual deepening is idleness. From time to time we need to quit rushing around and give ourselves to stillness and contemplation.

Sometimes our souls get off-center, like a heavy load of wash during the spin cycle. Nothing moves right; we sense our souls laboring and clunking and trying to get back on track. When that happens, nothing helps except to stop the spinning and rearrange the load.

You may have been told "Don't just stand there; do something!" Someone said that, in the midst of a frantic and hectic life they were told, "Don't just do something; stand there!"

Jesus took time to get away from the noise, the rush, the people, the expectations. He often went apart by himself. We're not told what he did during those times; we assume he needed time just to be. To meditate, to pray, perhaps even to take a nap.

Spend time today recentering your load. Get quiet. Breathe. Visualize your soul spinning slower and slower until it stops altogether, and everything that is inside comes to a place of rest. Consider what you could remove from the load to lighten it. Mentally rearrange the rest of it to make it more balanced.

Ask yourself:

What events in my life spin me out of control?

How can I minimize the effects of those events?

What is my center, the place where I am most myself?

What does it look and feel like when my life is balanced?



Write a prayer asking for the grace to stay centered and balanced, to stay awake, to remain aware of and grateful for the gifts of life.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### ⑥ The Promise of Peace

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read Isaiah 11:1–10. “Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of God.”

When you think of peace, what images come to mind? What images does the Isaiah passage include? In what ways are those metaphors meaningful (or not so meaningful) to you?

How is peace manifested in your home environment, in your work, in your community, or on a global level? What constitutes peace for you as an individual? What does peace look like? What does it feel like? When you lose it, how do you go about getting it back?

What one thing can you do today to bring peace to your own soul? What can you do to help bring peace to someone else?

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activities

### ⑦ Finding Community

**Supplies:**

- journal
- a pen

Our relationships are a series of concentric circles, like an archery target. At the center is the smallest, most intimate circle of connection—our spouse or partner, our closest emotional relationships. Extending outward from there are ever larger circles of extended family, friends, church and community connections, coworkers. All of us are connected to one another through different levels of intimacy.

Plan to spend some leisure time in a place where you can watch people. Take half an hour at a local coffee shop or restaurant, or at a mall or other central location where people come and go. Spend time watching the interactions between people.

Can you tell what kinds of relationships people have by the way they relate to one another? Try to identify business colleagues, friends, spouses or partners, acquaintances, strangers. Watch the way they interact: the formal politeness (or rudeness), the laughter, the silences, the relative levels of comfort and familiarity, or lack thereof.

In your journal, make a diagram of those concentric circles, and write in the names of the people you consider closest to you. Not the people you *think* should be closest, but the ones you truly feel connected with: the people you miss when you can't see them; the ones you want to call when something good happens, or when trouble strikes. The people who understand you, and connect with you spiritually and emotionally. The people you support with your love and care and concern, and those who support you.

These people are your community, your spiritual family. Take a moment to express your gratitude to God for them. And sometime during the coming week, make time to express your appreciation to them as well.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### 8. Lunchtime Nature Walk

**Supplies:** None

Take a lunch break, invite a friend or coworker, and go on a little walk. Use the time to clear your mind of the pressures and stresses of the day. You don't have to go far or see much, just find one thing along the way that speaks to you of beauty or brings you joy. Share it with your walking buddy.

It only takes a few minutes. One small spot of beauty or grace can change the direction of the entire day.

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 9. Gratitude Check

**Supplies:**

- a large bare branch from a tree
- a bucket filled with sand or small gravel
- artificial leaves (fabric or paper)
- permanent markers (fine or medium point)
- a box of paper clips

Affix the tree branch into the sand bucket so that it stands upright like a small bare tree.

From your local craft store, purchase an inexpensive stringer of brightly colored fall leaves, or cut some from construction paper. Place the leaves, pens, and paper clips in a basket near the tree.

For a week, or a month, or perhaps a whole season, encourage people to inscribe a leaf with a blessing, a joy, or a prayer, and hang it on the tree, using the paper clips for hangers. As the bare tree takes on brightly colored leaves, it will serve as a visual reminder of the power of joy to change our attitudes and perspectives.

## Reflect

"And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair."

—Kahlil Gibran

Do you think God is pleased when you run in the grass with your bare feet and feel the wind in your hair? How does connecting with the earth help connect you to God?

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# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Context and Mission

### About this Setting

Whether we're aware of it or not, all of us have a calling from God, a mission to use our gifts and abilities for the building up of the larger community of faith. The activities in this Exploration are designed to help us identify where we are in our spiritual lives, where we are going, and how we might discover a joyful, playful spirit along the way.

Someone said that it takes ten positive statements to outweigh a single negative, and unfortunately, most of us are affected by negativity on a daily basis. We can counteract that negative energy, however, by focusing our attention on the positive: the graces and blessings of our lives, the simple gifts for which we are grateful. When we exude that kind of positive spiritual energy, it not only changes our context, but it changes the atmosphere for those around us.

### About this Exploration

Whoever we are and wherever we are, God invites us to play and live joyfully. God calls us to trust self-learning and self-discovery, even though the experience may at times feel awkward. As we become more aware of truth, joy, and tears, and let go of that which is hurting and binding us, we gain a willingness to take discerning risks and find different ways of enjoying God's creation and life's daily journey. We release ourselves to the rhythm of the Spirit. In partnership with God and others, we open ourselves to new ways to practice faith in our community and world.

**BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:**

**John 12:20–36**

**Luke 1:39–56**

## Leader Preparation

Place information about these practices in your church newsletter, e-mail, and website postings. Include the following, edited to meet the individual needs of your congregation: “A personal exploration of Playing and Living Joyfully is available through our Faith Practices resources. These activities may enable you to play and live joyfully in your personal life, in family and home life, and in your community and work life.”

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### 1 Joyful, Joyful

**Supplies:**

- the traditional lyrics and tune for “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You/Thee” can be found at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>

Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” from the Ninth Symphony is one of the most powerful pieces of classical music in history, and Henry Van Dyke’s classic words make “Joyful, Joyful” a much loved and often sung hymn. With your family, friends, or other loved ones, consider these two different renditions of the hymn: <http://www.tinyurl.com/3alxdfw> and <http://www.tinyurl.com/cdsvh2>.

Which one speaks to you of true joy, and why? Which one reflects the way you think about and relate to God? What emotional and spiritual responses do you have when you hear each rendition? Which one will stay with you?

How does an experience like this motivate you to bring joy to those around you? Name one way you might reach out today to share that joy.

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### 2 Reading Night: *The Giving Tree*

**Supplies:**

- Shel Silverstein’s book *The Giving Tree*—you can watch the animated version and hear the author read the book at the following YouTube link: <http://www.tinyurl.com/6ajzmb>

Read the story aloud, or listen to Shel Silverstein read it. How does the story affect you? Does it comfort you, or trouble you?

Talk about the boy. If you identify with the boy, what does the tree represent for you? What gifts have you been given? Who in your life has made sacrifices for your well-being?

Talk about the tree. If you identify with the tree, who is the boy in your life? What sacrifices have you made for others? Why is the tree happy, even through all it has lost?

Is this a story about a healthy relationship or an unhealthy one? How can you find the balance between giving and receiving?

What primary gifts in your life can you offer to others? What gifts do you receive from those closest to you? How can you be more intentional about showing appreciation for the gifts offered to you?

## Sending & Serving Activity

### 3 Mystery Trip!

**Supplies:** None

You'll need five minutes (or ten, or thirty, or an hour, or half a day). This is an ongoing activity that can be as simple or as complex as you want to make it. Be creative; be joyful. Be aware of the world around you, and find ways to make it come alive for others.

Plan a “mystery trip” for someone you love. Alert the person to the need to be ready to go with you, and to ask no questions. The purpose of the trip is to surprise your loved one with something he or she might not ordinarily see—something that would make him or her laugh or bring delight or stimulate joy. You might walk out at night and look up at the moon and the stars (five minutes) or go to a dark pasture to lie on the hood of the car and watch a meteor shower (several hours). You might go to a concert or to listen to the baby birds you found in a nest outside your window. You might take your loved one out for ice cream or for a walk around the block, or you might plan and cook a candlelight dinner. You might drive to see a spectacular display of autumn leaves, or walk across the street to see the first crocus pushing up through the snow.

As you go about your daily activities, look for things you can share. You don't have to spend money or even invest a lot of time in order to bring joy to other people's lives. If you do this often enough, the people you love will begin to anticipate the words, “Mystery Trip!” and will know that you care enough to think about bringing joy and laughter into their lives.

## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

### 4 A New Magnificat

**Supplies:**

- pen
- journal

You will need 30 minutes of uninterrupted time. Read aloud Luke 1:39–56. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the unborn John within her womb leaps for joy. What makes your heart leap for joy?

The word “Magnificat” refers to the first words of Mary's song (in Latin): *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Reread Mary's song of praise and put yourself in her position:

- How has God “looked with favor” upon you?
- For what reasons would others look upon you and call you “blessed”?
- What “great things” has God done for you?
- What “mercy” has God shown to you?
- How do you see God “lifting up the lowly” and “filling the hungry”?
- What might God be “birthing” within you at the moment?



Write your own Magnificat.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
because the Mighty One has done great things for me: . . .”

Finish the poem/song with all the great things you can think of that God has done for you.

With all of God’s love, grace, and gifts in mind, what are ways that God might use you in your community to “lift up the lowly” and “fill the hungry with good things”? Choose one; it can be anything from a day serving at your local soup kitchen or food pantry to helping out in a literacy class at night. Whatever you choose to do, do it with an awareness that, just as God has called you “blessed,” you have the opportunity to bless someone else and validate someone else’s worth.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 5 Practicing the Presence

**Supplies:** None

Seventeenth-century monk Brother Lawrence, in the classic book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, offers the following prayer:

*“Lord of all pots and pans and things . . .  
Make me a saint by getting meals  
and washing up the plates.”*

Sometimes we mistakenly think that God’s “call” is only for religious leaders: priests or nuns or monks, pastors or Christian education directors or youth leaders or music ministers. They are the full-time “professional Christians,” after all, the ones who have studied and obtained degrees and been ordained. The rest of us ordinary folks can’t begin to measure up to that.

But the truth is, God’s calling is for all of us. No matter who we are or what we do, we are called by God to live out our faith on a daily basis, and to allow our faith to affect every area of our lives. “The time of work,” Brother Lawrence said, “does not with me differ from the time of prayer. In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great a tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Supper.”

You can download, print, and read the entire text of this classic of devotional literature online: <http://www.tinyurl.com/3332441>.

Think about your own calling, your sense of mission. A calling doesn’t have to be something big or important in the eyes of the world. You can be called to wash dishes as well as to preach. Whatever you sense your calling to be, it affects not only you and your relationship with God, but the way you interact with those around you.

Consider your daily activities—the things you’re good at, the things you love to do, the things that generate energy within you. How can you find God’s presence in the midst of those things, a way to connect with God in your everyday life? How can your job, or home life, or relationships become sacramental for you?



How can you see beyond the immediate task to discover something of the divine in the midst of those activities? And beyond that, how can your calling become a source of blessing for someone else?

Ask God to open your eyes and keep you awake to the presence of the holy. Let your daily routine be transformed by an awareness that God is in it with you. Reach out beyond yourself to bring joy or meaning to someone else's life.

## Sending & Serving Activities

### ⑥ Personal Mission Statement

**Supplies:**

- paper or journal and pen or pencil

What is your mission in life? What kind of person are you, and who do you want to become? What is your spiritual focus? What do you want to accomplish over the next year, or two, or five?

If you have no idea how to begin answering such questions, perhaps it's time to think about writing a personal mission statement. Corporations, both nonprofit and for-profit companies, have been doing this for years. Having a mission statement helps keep them focused on what's important, and on the motivation behind their use of time and resources.

There is no set "formula" for a personal mission statement. It is simply a way put into writing a description of what's most important to you, and how you intend to use your energy, actions, behavior, and decisions to accomplish your goals. Most mission statements are fairly brief—a few sentences or paragraphs. It should be positive (what you want to do or become) rather than negative (what you don't want), and as specific as you can make it.

Writing a mission statement gives you the opportunity to dig deep and get in touch with the real you, to explore dreams for the future, evaluate where you've been, assess gifts and skills and talents.

It may take some time and thought for you to write this mission statement. You might have to let the ideas simmer in your mind for a while before they begin to come together. But over the next few days or weeks, think about and journal about some of the following questions, a few per day, just to get yourself started:

- What brings me joy?
- What excites me?
- What fulfills me?
- What brings me peace?
- What brings me a sense of drawing closer to God?
- What top three character traits do I most want to have?
- What positive behaviors do I want to develop?
- What do I want to eliminate from my life?
- What primary values are important to me?
- What do I treasure more than anything else?
- If I were about to lose everything and could save only one thing, what would it be?
- What does this tell me about my priorities?
- How can my actions and behaviors support those priorities?
- What do I want others to see in me?

- What spiritual or religious values are important in my life?
- How does God play a part in the changes I would like to see in my life?
- If today were my last day on earth, what would I want to do with it?

If you'd like some help, you can build an interactive personal mission statement from scratch at <http://www.tinyurl.com/d7u82f>.

Once you've developed your personal mission statement, revisit it frequently. Use it as a prayer. Edit or rewrite it as circumstances or personal goals mandate.

It will grow with you as you grow and change, and will give you a focus for your decisions and investments of time and energy.

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activities

#### 7 A Bowl of Affirmations

**Supplies:**

- bag of small hard candies, individually wrapped
- some small strips of paper
- colored markers
- bowl or basket

Using bright multicolored markers, write encouraging words and phrases on the strips of paper, such as:

- joy
- peace
- have a happy day
- listen to the wind
- give me a smile
- you're a good person
- I appreciate you
- thanks for your friendship
- let the love flow

. . . or whatever other sentiments you find meaningful.

Wrap the papers around the candies, and twist or tape them on. Fill the bowl or basket and take it to work or church or wherever you can share it with others.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities

### 8 Dance of Joy

**Supplies:**

- copy of the painting “Joyful Dance” by Diana Ong, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters11>

Spend a few moments considering the painting. How does it speak to you of joy? Of community? Put yourself in the dance. Can you feel the energy of the movement? Can you hear the music? Who would be dancing with you? How can your dance change the world—or at least some tiny corner of it?

Let the joy of the moment fill you, and take it with you into your day.

## Sending & Serving Activities

### 9 We Wish to See Jesus

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper or journal, and pen or pencil

In John 12:20–21, a group of Greeks (Gentiles, unbelievers) came to the disciples and said, “We wish to see Jesus.”

Some things never change. The world still wants to see Jesus. People on the outside look into the church, and what they see is often empty, meaningless ritual, or incomprehensible doctrine, or even flagrant hypocrisy. And they turn away, because what they really want is to see Jesus. They look to us and hope to find care and compassion, forgiveness, a new start, acceptance, wisdom, welcome, justice, and grace.

People want to see Jesus. But Jesus is not here on earth—not in the flesh, anyway. Jesus is only here in spirit, in our hearts, as we walk in the way of love and live out the message of love in our own lives. Those of us who call ourselves Christians have a responsibility to live out our faith in our daily lives, to offer to people around us a meaningful engagement with the Holy. For better or worse, we represent Jesus in this world. That is our mission and our call—to reveal Jesus to others in ways they can understand.

## Reflect

“The true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground.” —G. K. Chesterton

What is your response to the idea that the object of human life is play? Does earth have to be a task garden? In what ways might heaven be a playground?

Let’s get beyond the “do’s” and “don’ts,” the dogma and the doctrine. Who is Jesus, really? How does Jesus manifest something of God’s character in human form?

What do you think are Jesus’ most important characteristics? Love? Forgiveness? Empathy? Justice? Make a list. What do people see when they look at you? How can you begin today to show them who Jesus really is?

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# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Future and Vision

### About this Setting

Life is a journey, not a destination. So it is in our individual lives and in our relationships with God and other people. As we move into the future, we take with us the daily faith practices that sustain and enliven us, and share our joy with one another.

How is it that as we grow up, we lose childlikeness and wonder along the way? Jesus entreats us to have the faith of a child, and although that sounds good, we're not always sure what it means. Let us open our hearts and allow the Spirit to show us new ways of being, new ways of relating to God—new ways of giving ourselves to playfulness and joy.

### About this Exploration

We understand from Jesus that the heart of a child invites us into the realm of God. Living and playing joyfully propels Christian congregations, families, and individuals to respond to this invitation with imagination, creativity, spontaneity, wonder, delight, and hope. Thus equipped we enjoy God's creation—of which we are a part—and confront adversity, scarcity, and fear. Our joyful living leads us to acts of compassion and social justice; our joyful playing makes space for peace.

**BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:**

**Mark 16:1–8**  
**Psalms 112**

**Leader Preparation**

Place information about these practices in your church newsletter, e-mail, and website postings. Include the following, edited to meet the individual needs of your congregation: “A personal exploration of Playing and Living Joyfully is available through our Faith Practices resources. These activities may enable you to play and live joyfully in your personal life, in family and home life, and in your community and work life.”

**Household and Family Life**

**Exploring & Engaging Activity**

**1 Stargazing**

**Supplies:**

- (optional) movie *Contact*, with Jodie Foster, or an episode of *The Cosmos* by Carl Sagan

There is no experience that connects us with the majesty and wonder of God’s created universe like looking at the stars. Here are some things you can do:

- If you’re fortunate enough to have one nearby, take your family or a group of friends to a planetarium.
- Go out on a clear night and spend time looking up at the heavens.
- Spend the time and effort to experience one of the annual meteor showers. An annual schedule can be found at: <http://www.tinurl.com/yeb1uls>.
- Explore the amazing photos taken from the Hubble telescope at <http://www.hubblesite.org/gallery>.
- Examine where you are in the universe with one of the many interactive sky and constellation charts available online:
  - <http://www.tinurl.com/yhuby2q>
  - <http://www.tinurl.com/3xfv2kn>
  - <http://www.tinurl.com/32p37d9>
- For an alternative dose of wonder and speculation, get together and watch the movie *Contact*, with Jodie Foster or an episode of *The Cosmos* by Carl Sagan.

After you’ve spent some time stargazing, or watching the movie, talk with your family and/or friends about your experience.

- What does it feel like, realizing how minuscule we humans are in the vast expanse of the universe?
- Does the enormity of space make you speculate about what might be “out there”?
- In what ways do the artistic beauty and symmetry of the universe speak to you of God?
- In the movie, Ellie weeps at the beauty of her contact, and says, “You should have sent a poet.” What do you suppose she means by that? In what ways are poetry and theology more fitting for such an experience than science?

**Discerning & Deciding Activity**

**2 Hope for the Flowers**

**Supplies:**

- book *Hope for the Flowers* by Trina Paulus. Purchase a copy for yourself, or you can read it online at: <http://www.tinurl.com/32tuq4w>.
- Bible

Read *Hope for the Flowers* together and talk about it, using the discussion starters below.

- This little book is called “a tale partly about life, partly about revolution, and a lot about hope.” In what way is it about revolution?
- What responses do you have to the pillar of caterpillars, and what’s at the top? Does the experience of climbing to the top feel familiar to you?
- Where, if anywhere, is God in the story? Does the story speak to you about priorities, about changing anything in your life?
- Stripe gets restless, while Yellow is content with their life together. Which kind of caterpillar are you?
- What kinds of sacrifices does Yellow make in order to learn to fly? How are her sacrifices different from the ones Stripe makes? What does this say to you about the decisions and choices you make in your own life?
- The temptation to “climb the ladder” applies to children and teenagers as well as adults. How does society encourage us to step on others in order to get ahead? How can we be countercultural in our choices to live differently?
- Read Mark 16:1–8, about the resurrection of Jesus. In what way is *Hope for the Flowers* a resurrection story?

## Sending & Serving Activities

### ③ Benestrophe Wall

**Supplies:**

- heavy butcher paper or thick newsprint, preferably white
- multicolored fine or medium-point permanent markers

We’re all familiar with the concept of catastrophe—the bad stuff that happens so often we come to expect it. But how would life be different if, rather than wearing a T-shirt that says “Stuff Happens” (or words to that effect), we began to focus on the good stuff, the benestrophes of life.

A benestrophe is the opposite of a catastrophe. The word comes from the Latin *bene*, meaning “good,” and the Greek *strophe*, meaning “turning.” It’s the conviction that “grace happens” all around us, every day, if we just have the eyes to see it.

This is an ongoing, long-term activity for home and family that will help us see the goodness of God’s grace in our lives by creating a Benestrophe Wall.

Choose a wall or door in your house that is easily accessible. Cover the space with butcher paper, using masking tape so as not to damage the surface. It’s a good idea to use multiple layers so the marker doesn’t bleed through.

In large bright letters at the top, write the word BENESTROPHE, and underneath, “Grace Happens.” When you have company, or for your own family on a daily basis, use the wall or door like a guest book, where people can leave positive messages, draw happy faces, or write favorite quotations. Encourage your family and friends to let their creativity go, and save the artwork as a reminder of how positive energy can bring joy and connection and blessing into our lives.



## Individual and Personal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### ④ Heaven Lies About Us

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;  
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
 Hath had elsewhere its setting  
 And cometh from afar;  
 Not in entire forgetfulness,  
 And not in utter nakedness,  
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
 From God, who is our home.  
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

—William Wordsworth, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Earl  
 Childhood"

What do you think Wordsworth means when he says, "Heaven lies about us in our infancy" and "trailing clouds of glory do we come/From God, who is our home"?

Jesus seems to agree that children's spirits are more closely connected with the divine. Jesus repeatedly exhorts his followers to "have the faith of a little child," and reminds them that the realm of heaven belongs to those who have a childlike heart. Read Mark 9:30–37.

What is so remarkable about a child's faith and a child's connection with the Holy? In what ways do children teach us healthy ways of being in the world, and of relating to God and to one another?

As you look toward the future and consider ways you would like to grow and develop, how can you commit yourself to being more childlike? How can you incorporate more joy and more play into your life?

### Discerning & Deciding Activity

#### ⑤ Peregrinatio: Finding the Place of Your Resurrection

**Supplies:**

- journal

*Peregrinatio* is the Latin word for "pilgrimage." However, it does not mean a physical pilgrimage to a tangible holy site such as Rome or Lourdes or the Holy Land. It's a far deeper journey, as Esther De Waal describes in *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination*, <http://www.tinyurl.com/3anm7ja>.

The Celtic peregrinatio, she says, is vastly different from the journey taken by a pilgrim in the Middle Ages. Those journeys had an end in mind—a shrine or

holy place—and a mission to accomplish. Nor was the peregrinatio an act of obedience to some abbot or monastic superior; it was, rather, the response to an inner prompting:

“a passionate conviction that they must undertake . . . an inner journey. Ready to go wherever the Spirit might take them, what they are seeking is the place of their resurrection, the resurrected self, the true self in Christ, which is for all of us our true home.”

So peregrinatio presents us with the ideal of the interior, inward journey that is undertaken for the love of God, or for the love of Christ.

Spend time journaling about your own inner journey, about the vision you have (or might develop) for your relationship with God and your own spiritual growth and deepening.

- Where do you think your spiritual journey is leading you?
- How can you cooperate with the divine in discovering your own direction?
- What kind of inner promptings do you feel, and how might you follow them?
- Are there places within you that need to be brought back to life?
- What does it mean to you to “find the place of your resurrection”?

## Sending & Serving Activity

### ⑥ Metaphors of the Soul: Making a Medicine Bag

**Supplies:**

- small cloth or leather bag

In Native American culture, shamans often create and carry a medicine bag for healing, guidance, or protection. The shaman may share the contents of his or her bag with others for their healing or well-being, but for the most part, a medicine bag is an intensely personal collection of items that speak to the soul.

Whether or not we accept the miraculous or magical properties of medicine bags, they can be useful to us as visual emblems of our faith.

You may decide to purchase the bag, or you may want to make one for yourself. It doesn't matter how large or small it is, but it should be simple and functional and capable of holding the items you choose to put inside.

What you put in it is entirely up to you. You may want to choose items that speak to you of your past, your present, and your future—items that reflect your authentic self and remind you who you are. A stone, a bird's feather, bark from a tree, a shell from the beach. A crystal, a leaf, a dried flower, perhaps. Choose natural items that connect you with the earth, and with the depths of your own spirit.

Let your medicine bag remind you where you have come from and where you are going. Let it be for you a metaphor of your own beautiful soul.

## Work Place and Communal Life

### Exploring & Engaging Activity

#### ⑦ Be Still and Know: Learning to Listen to Others and to the Spirit within Us

**Supplies:**

- journal

We live in a noisy, fast-paced, and sometimes frazzled world, where there's lots of talk but very little communication. We often get caught up in what we're going to say next, in believing that our ideas are more important than someone else's, in trying to convince people to agree with us rather than really hearing what they have to say.

If we intend to walk the way of Jesus, however, we need to learn to listen, not just with our ears, but with our hearts. Jesus took time to engage all kinds of people, to listen to their stories, to hear what they didn't say. He saw beyond the facade of anger or fear or defensiveness to the underlying pain, the need simply to be heard and valued and cared for.

We can do that, too. You don't have to be a therapist or counselor to be a nonanxious, calming presence in another person's life. You don't have to have "answers" or be able to "fix it." You simply need to be able to listen.

The next time you're in a conversation with someone who annoys you, rather than turning them off or making a hasty retreat, commit to listening. Don't argue. Don't confront. Just listen. Say, "Tell me more about that," or "That must have been difficult for you," or "Yes, I see how you could feel that way." Let them find their own way without your help. Just be there. Just care.

Try this: For one day, make a commitment not to talk about yourself, not to give your opinion, not to try to convince other people that your way is right. Just encourage others to talk about themselves and their lives, while you listen. Listen with the heart. Listen with the mind of Christ. Don't try to analyze or fix them; don't criticize or blame. Just listen, and ask yourself how you might support them and pray for them and encourage them.

Later on, journal about how it felt to listen without judgment or anxiety. Turn the exercise inward, and listen without judgment to what your own heart is telling you.

You may find this to be an immensely freeing experience, an exercise in grace. You may come away understanding the people you encounter better.

## Discerning & Deciding Activity

### ⑧ Developing a Play Ethic

**Supplies:**

- video clip: “Sound of Music, Antwerp, Belgium,”

<http://www.tinyurl.com/cr935m>

The video was shot in the Central Train Station in Antwerp, Belgium: Watch the video, then share it with someone else and talk about your responses.

- What is your personal response to watching the video?
- How does your own joy and excitement grow as the video unfolds?
- What attitudes are reflected on the faces of the observers as the music begins?
- What changes come over them during the course of the dance?
- What unlikely folks join in the dance?
- How do you think this experience made the day better for those who watched or participated in it?
- Do you think this event was more fun because it was unexpected?
- How might you bring joy and fun into others’ lives by doing the unexpected?

## Sending & Serving Activity

### ⑨ Joyfully, without Regret

**Supplies:**

- paper and pen or pencil

Two roads diverged in a wood and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

—Robert Frost, “The Road Less Traveled”

What brings you joy? What brings you peace? What makes you truly happy? Who are the people without whom your life would feel incomplete? Where do you find your deepest connection with the divine? What would it take for you to live joyfully, without regret?

The answers to those questions help us identify the priorities and principles that guide our lives. The truth is, unless we set our own priorities, the world will set them for us, and we will end up living by values that are not our own.

Look toward the future. Write your own obituary. What do you want people to say about you after you’re gone? How do you want to be remembered? What do you want inscribed on your tombstone? What changes will you make now in order for those priorities to be firmly established in your life?

Share it with someone else. Come home. Come to your true self. Return to your

joy. Return to love and grace and playfulness. Return to the One who loves you.

The sweetest word  
upon the tongue  
is  
“Come.”

Come back to where  
you once belonged,  
back to those who  
knew you,  
loved you,  
believed the best of you.

Row, if your ship has sailed;  
Swim, if all your bridges have been burned;  
Fly, if the chasm seems too wide or deep—  
But come.

—Penelope J. Stokes, excerpt from the novel *Delta Belles* (Doubleday, 2006).  
Used by permission. <http://www.tinyurl.com/354u14r>

## Reflect

“Be glad of life because it gives you the chance to love and to work and to play and to look up at the stars.”

—Henry Van Dyke

What do you see when you look up at the stars? How do you feel? What does the majesty of the universe say about God’s love for you? How do loving and working and playing and looking up at the stars bring you home to your true self?