



The Child's World of Play and Pain

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Watching school-aged children at recess provides an excellent opportunity to observe the effects of sudden and severe pain caused by minor injuries. The difference between the healthy child, playing vigorously, and the injured child, motionless on the ground, is striking. The healthy child is constantly in motion. The games that children play always involve running or skipping, jumping or tumbling. Yet let a child injure himself or herself, and this motion is obliterated in an instant. In the time it takes to fall to the ground the injured child becomes paralyzed in pain. There is no movement possible for the one who has just sprained an ankle or skinned a knee. For the injured child there is only pain—pain which can be seen in the way the child lies still; pain which can be seen in the way the child slowly moves to inspect the injured area; pain which can be seen in the tear-stained, contorted face of the youngster. The child in pain has been removed from the happy, playful world in which he or she responded quickly and readily to the adult's words of encouragement and friendship. It is a private world, the world of pain. Following an injury, the adult stands by helpless, not knowing what to say, unable to comfort the sobbing child.

What does it mean to hurt? What does *hurt* do to the world of a child? How does a hurt child live out the world of pain? The answers to these questions can be found in a careful description of the child at play. This description includes the happy, light, laughing child who runs and skips over the earth, as well as the despondent, heavy, tearful child who lies broken and still on the ground. The child in pain has suddenly been removed to a distant world, a world that is foreign to the one not suffering that pain. A *pedagogy* of pain will introduce the adult to the terrain of the child's painful world. A careful contrast between the child's world of action and world of pain provides an introduction to the language of pain. It allows us access, no matter for now how tentative, how faltering, to the child's painful world. With this first access comes understanding, and with understanding the possibility for comfort.

The Game

I watch as a young girl in the first grade plays with her friends. This game involves no ball, no jump rope. The children merely run about, to and fro, laughing and jostling each other. The legs of this girl impress me because they are so short, yet she is so quick. The legs move her swiftly, with small, rapid steps. She changes direction many times, for the game does not involve running great distances. First one direction, then another, she runs a zig-zag pattern among the five or six children with whom she is playing. It is difficult to tell the object of this game. The children seem to be trying to tag one another, but there does not seem to be one person who is *it*. Everyone is tagging everyone else in a hubbub of activity. This girl grabs someone, then runs away a few steps, stops, twirls around, and runs after someone else. Her arms are no less involved in her movement than are her legs. Her arms work vigorously as she runs. They pump back and forth the way arms move when one runs, but these arms do so much more. They fly out from her sides to help maintain balance when she twirls or jumps; they reach out to grab someone; they are pulled down by her sides as someone wraps his or her arms around this girl. Sometimes, as she laughs, she places her hands at her mouth, fingers slightly apart on her lips.

The Fall

But this scene is not to continue. At one point in the game something happens. One of her playmates turns too quickly and runs in front of her. She stumbles over this obstacle. After making contact with this other person, the little girl takes one or two steps, still moving forward but beginning to go down. Her legs try to stay beneath the weight of her body; it looks as if they are trying to *catch up* to her, but the attempt soon becomes hopeless. Her arms fly outward from her body in an attempt to maintain her balance. The phrase *clawing the air* is an accurate description of what she does with her arms. They reach out to grab something, but there is nothing there. For an instant she seems to hang in the air. The expression on her face is different from a moment before. She is no longer laughing, but she is not crying either. Her face is *blank*; it is without any recognizable expression.

It is at this moment that the fall occurs. The little girl goes down quickly and heavily. The knees bend. The toes of both feet are on the ground. Her hands are out in front of her as she falls. Her hands reach the ground first and her arms bend at the elbows under the weight of her falling body. Her knees hit the ground next, and, because of the forward momentum of her body, her

hands slide along in front of her and the rest of her torso makes abrupt and final contact with the ground.

For a moment the girl is absolutely motionless. She lies exactly as she has fallen, face down, arms outstretched, slightly bent at the elbows, legs slightly bent at the knees. Then, slowly, she pushes herself up to a sitting position. She bends her right leg as her two hands clasp the shin, and she draws the knee up to where she can view the extent of the injury. Once in this position she is again motionless. Her friends have stopped playing and have gathered around her. They stand still and look at her skinned knee; some pat her on the shoulder; one stoops and puts an arm around her. But the little girl is still sitting, holding her knee, looking closely at the scraped skin. By now I am close enough to her to see that she is crying. As I approach she looks up at me and I see that her face is contorted into an agonized expression with tears running down her cheeks. Her hair has fallen in her face all but completely hiding her eyes. She looks back to her injured knee. I can see that her hands are grasping her shin tightly, just below the scraped knee. She moves her right hand and begins to touch the injury, but hesitates with her hand poised over her knee. She then makes a fist with this hand, replaces it on her shin, and cries a little harder.

I ask her if she wants to go see the nurse and she nods. I lift her to her feet, but she does not stand with her weight evenly distributed. She stands with most of her weight on her left leg, while her right leg remains bent at the knee. Nor does she put all her weight on the injured leg when she walks. She keeps the knee slightly bent and hops on the right foot while she quickly places the left foot in front, to take the weight of her body. In this way, she limps away from the scene of her accident, moving slowly, weeping quietly.

The Body of Play

How does one know that a child is healthy? You know that a child is healthy because he or she moves. The world of the healthy grade-school-aged child on the playground is a world of motion. Some children run, some walk, some sit down (but these never sit still). The healthy child moves through his or her playground completely involved in the task which concerns him or her at the moment. The little girl in the above description gave herself over to her game without thought of how to make her body move in the directions in which she wanted to go.

Consider the game of jump rope. The child who successfully jumps rope first stands outside the turning rope, watching it go around. He or she then puts his or her hands up and begins to

rock the body back and forth in rhythm to the turning rope. At the proper instant the child runs in and begins to jump. No one ever jumped rope long by trying to keep it from hitting his or her feet. One jumps rope by *becoming*, in a sense, the turning rope. As in dancing, the child jumping rope allows the rhythm of the turning rope to enter the body. That is the reason for the little jump between the skips over the rope. The rhythm is all. The dance of the skipping rope can be successfully performed only if the child can move to the rhythm of the turning rope without thinking about the literal action of jumping off the ground to keep the rope from hitting the ankles. For children playing, the body must become the game being played. It is no more possible to separate the rope skipper from the skipping of rope than it is to separate the dancer from the dance.

Children's bodily involvement in their games is lived out through a particular disposition for action. Children are able to play games because their bodies are suited to perform the action that is required by a particular game. Yet it is not the body alone that creates the game. The children's actions are formed by two kinds of rules: rules they made up, and another set that are not made up—*rules of nature* one might say. Within the overall structure that the *child-made* rules of the game afford, the child will often take certain liberties that he or she may or may not get away with. The *child-made* rules can be broken or changed, without severe consequences. Children who break a rule of the game might be able to slip their improvisations past their playmates, or they might encounter the unanimous censure of the other actors. But should the momentum of their action on the playground impel them beyond the limits of the rules of nature, they will most assuredly meet with the severe and immediate censure of an injury. Children act in response to what the game may require at the moment, unmindful of the dangers their actions may pose, either for themselves or for others around them.

The Game Clock

The child's bodily involvement in the game he or she plays suggests a particular meaning of time. A child involved in a game during recess is neither dreaming about the past nor concerned with the future. It would also be wrong to suggest that the child is deeply concerned about living the present moment to the fullest. Just as the child at play forgets his or her body as a physical entity, so too does he or she forget time as a progression of past, present, and future. Time for the child at recess becomes a present to be filled with the player's eternal action. The child who rushes onto the still vacant playground

after a hurriedly eaten lunch enters a kind of eternity that is filled with games; a time that is full of possibility and fun; a time which seems at first as if it will last forever, but in the end is always over too soon. In this way, the little first grader of my description was thinking of time all the while—not the passing of time but the *filling up* of time.

The lunch period, for the healthy child, is not measured in minutes, but in the games that can be played. The child must squeeze as much activity, as much motion, into the lunch period as possible. A moment before, the playground was vacant, timeless, atemporal. Yet the child, in a flurry of activity, brings his or her time with him or her from the lunchroom. The healthy child's time is the time of activity; at recess there is time to play. The child's timepiece is not a watch but the basketball he or she dribbles, the football he or she kicks. Most of the younger children do not know at what time they have to go in, but they know that they will not be able to play forever. Children know that some *time* soon they will see their teacher and know that their play period is over. For the players in this situation, time is of the essence; children know that they cannot waste their time.

For this reason, children hate to be interrupted in their playing. I remember once there was a disturbance in a basketball game. I arrived on the scene and attempted to mediate the situation by suggesting alternative teams. There was much debate over the efficacy of my suggestions, but one boy constantly reminded his playmates that pretty soon they would have to go in. "Come on," he said, "Let's just play." These boys did not know what time it was at the moment, nor did they know what time they went in every day; but they were reminded by this spokesman that soon they would have no more time to play basketball. Such a warning did not cause them to lament the passage of their lunch hour; rather, it had the opposite effect. After I suggested a few possible teams, none of which met with unanimous approval, the boy who spoke before hurriedly divided the group and said, "Let's just play this way, there's not enough time!" The thought that soon they would have to quit spurred the boys to make better use of their time, to fill the remaining moments with what they were there to do. In the poem *To His Coy Mistress*, Marvel describes this same experience of time. The young actor could have said it this way (Brooks & Warren, 1960, p. 308):

Had we but worlds enough, and time,
This debate, friends, were no crime.
But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;

Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

The child on the playground not only races against his or her playmates, he or she also races against the sun. This is how time flies for the healthy youngster.

Room to Play

The world for the healthy child at recess is the playground. Yet, as with the body and time, this world is lived out in a particular way. At recess, the playground for the healthy child is the space that is filled by the game he or she is playing. There are as many different *playgrounds* on a playground as there are players playing games. Some children play football, some skip rope, some mill about the fence under the trees. The characteristic that all these players share is that they inhabit a particular world with the body of the game they are playing. The single large location, set aside by the adults as the playground, is transformed into countless worlds, all being lived out individually by the playing bodies of the children.

Children give meaning to their playground according to the game that they are playing. Football players need a large area, with definite boundaries. They define the playground in terms of *in bounds* and *out of bounds*. Football players live the playground according to the meaning of these boundaries. It does not matter that there are hundreds of square feet of open space all around; the game cannot be carried over into this area. The meaning of the playground for these players comes from the task of the moment which they are living bodily. Only a football body can properly inhabit this space which is now their playground.

Rope skippers do not need as large a physical space as football players, but they need no less a world to encompass their one particular game. To jump rope one must have a few square feet of flat ground free of obstacles. The one who jumps rope lives the meaning of his or her playground in terms of this world which he or she created and inhabits. The playground for the rope skipper is that space created by the child, bodily engaged in the experience of jumping rope. The playground at recess is not a single, objective place; it is a world full of the possibility for play that presents itself to the child.

Yet life on the playground is not all fun and games. The little girl of my description tripped and fell. This incident changed her into a different person. She was in pain.

Pain in the Afternoon

The hurt child is a still child. There is no movement for the child who is hurt. The body, which an instant before was forgotten by the dancing, playing child, suddenly becomes the center of the child's attention. The child is pressed to the ground by his or her pain. A child thus injured is no longer *grounded* in his or her world. No longer does the earth support the child and allow him or her to play his or her games. The earth now subsumes the child, swallows the child, and makes it difficult to distinguish the one from the other. As the earth is motionless, so also is the injured body. If the body of the child becomes the earth, then in that way it becomes his or her ground. His or her body is no longer grounded in the world; rather, he or she is grounded in this body, which now becomes his or her whole world. The same body that a moment before was flying over the surface of the earth, the body that was jumping high into the air, the body that performed countless gymnastic feats that propelled it over unseen caverns and across vast stretches of land, now lies still, just the way it fell.

The injured body is much heavier than the healthy body. One can see this in the way the child must push herself up from her agonizing position. The girl in the description had to push herself up with both arms into a sitting posture. This movement took much effort, much more effort than the times she watched television on her stomach and then decided she wanted to sit up. There was no effort involved. The decision "I want to sit up" was enough. In that same instant the girl was magically and effortlessly transformed from a lying position to a sitting position. But now she is not watching television on her stomach; the intention to sit up will not be magically accomplished this time. To sit up, the little girl will have to use every bit of strength and willpower she possesses. We often speak of dead weight. If sleep is the brother of death, is not pain also a close relation? What is death if it is not stillness? The injured child must overcome her dead weight to force herself to sit up. The motionless child on the ground partakes for an instant in the experience of death, and it is an heroic effort to begin the long journey back to one's feet after having been laid so low.

Healthy children run onto the playground which invites them, beckons them, into the world of play. Before the injury, the child joyfully and expectantly enters the playground. The playground befriends the child. Earlier that morning, she looked forward to lunch and recess, and, as she ran out of doors into the fresh air, she was glad to be there. Yet, for the injured child, the playground is no longer a friendly place. The playground, which

before had welcomed the child, now remains silent and unsympathetic, as the child lies still, in pain.

We speak of people being *hard* when we wish to describe an insensitive, cruel person. This idiom may have first been used by a youngster who had fallen down and hurt himself or herself. The hurting child lies on a hard playground. Moments before, the healthy playground encouraged the child to play by the space it offered to him or her for movement. But now the hurt child inhabits a motionless playground. The invitation, which before urged the child to games and fun, has been withdrawn. The hurting playground is unyielding; it is rigid. There is no room on the playground now because there is no movement. The young girl, after she fell, sat up and gathered her body into as small a location as she could. Her arms helped pull her legs to her and her head was bent peering closely at her injury. The playground is no longer the happy world through which she moved moments before. The opportunities for movement have vanished into the pain of the injury. All that remains is the hurting playground, the world of her hurt, the world that is no bigger than the pain of her scraped knee, yet a world completely filled by her suffering.

Every healthy child is healthy in his or her own way; all children who are in pain resemble each other. The healthy child lives a body, and therefore a world, that is unique. Each child plays in his or her own way, inhabiting that playground which he or she has created by his or her personal involvement in the world of play. Healthy children inhabit different bodies to play in different worlds. When one becomes familiar enough with children, it is possible to distinguish individuals by the way they move, without being close enough to see their faces. "That must be Chris because that is the way Chris throws a football." "I recognize Suzanne jumping rope because I have seen her jump rope like that before." Healthy children express their uniqueness in the way that they inhabit their playful body in the world of play. I described one girl playing tag. To give an accurate account of the way all children play would take as many descriptions as there are children. Yet this single instance of a fall and subsequent injury is characteristic of every child who suffers pain. One cannot distinguish the injured child from a distance. Children fall the same way. The body that falls is the body overcome by the world. Children lie still the same way. The body on the ground is the body subsumed by the world. The healthy child surrenders his or her uniquely personal existence for the anonymity of pain. The healthy child takes up the playful body in acceptance of the invitation of the world. The injured child is

taken over by the painful body in consequence of the authority of the world.

Time for the injured child no longer flies. As the body of the child has been paralyzed, confined to a stationary world of hurt, so the experience of time reflects this new existence. The clock moves as slowly as the child. Time for the injured child is no longer that period filled with his or her games. The injured child measures time in the all-encompassing present of his or her hurting wound. The little girl who fell down was only aware that her knee hurt; there was no future for her, for there was no movement. She could engage in no activity as long as she was in pain. The injured child is only able to resume his or her normal activity, that is, his or her normal relation to time, after the pain begins to subside. As long as the child is in pain, he or she is unable to measure the passage of time. The healthy child fills life with activity. The healthy child knows that soon play time will be over. The child knows this because he or she has been playing basketball *for quite some time*. The injured child only knows pain. For the injured child there is no teacher, there is no eventual walk back into the classroom. This pain is as paralyzing to the clock as it is to the body. The agonizing moments crawl by for the child who hurts.

It would be a mistake to cast the world as the villain in this drama. There is no treachery involved. The healthy child, accepting the invitation of the playground, is not being lured to certain injury, as the Greek sailors of old were lured to their deaths by the sirens. No child is deceived for long by fraud. If the healthy playground was, in fact, a front hiding the *real* world of injury, the child would quickly learn this. He or she would soon understand that there was no such thing as the *friendly, inviting* playground that I described above. It would all be one to the child, and we would readily see different behavior on the part of youngsters at recess. But the injured child is soon reconciled to his or her world. The injury does not cause a permanent rift between player and stage. The player may suddenly be cast as a patient, but, as this word itself implies, with time the injured will again be a player, at home in the world, despite the possibility for such a scene to be replayed at any time.

Reference

- Brooks, C., & Warren, R.P. (1960). *Understanding poetry* (3rd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.