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The Pedagogy of Elder Play: The Joy of Living, Learning, and Riding Motorcycles

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The world we live in is complicated and gray with overwhelming problems: political corruption that favors the elite, opioid addiction fueled by pharmaceutical corporations, misinformation used to shape how we think, racism and a legal system that targets black men, sexism that fuels the machismo ego and clouds what we want in a loving relationship, and the neoliberal trend to value narcissistic goals to acquire more degrees so we can find self-worth. These are a few examples of what motivate some of the keenest researchers in adult education in our search for answers and pragmatic solutions that incorporate adult learning toward what might be called the *democratic ideal*. This concept of the *ideal*, is the foundation of our field and can be traced back to the seminal writing of Walter Rauschenbusch, John Dewey, Eduard Lindeman, and Jane Addams a hundred years ago to the more recent insightful analysis of John Rawls. W. Jethro Brown in 1904 attempted to define the democratic ideal in terms of liberty and freedom, which were and will continually be desiccated by philosophies of individualism and unfettered capitalism as we put ourselves first because we have freedom and liberty at the expense of the common good. There is this dialectic push and pull between liberty and democracy, between freedom and the common good, which defines civil society.

The reflective person seeks relative truth to understand his or her position in this social milieu filled with complexities that belie rational thought and what utopians might refer to as collective consciousness. For myself, this search for meaning and truth has defined much of my professional career. I have been defined by others as a utopian, an idealist, a post-modern radical, and a pragmatist seeking concrete solutions to complex problems. And though I see myself in all of these labels I continue this search for meaning — what is my purpose here on earth. In my travels I have crossed paths with many other seekers, and each time I focused on listening to their story. The stories that capture my imagination, and force me to reevaluate who I am, are those that convey a deep sense of *joy*, a passion for life, a passion to engage the world and to find happiness.

This research is a response to the world's intractable problems, to the seriousness of adult education research, and to the muck in which we bury ourselves and build academic careers from our ineptitude to change the world. It is most importantly though a response to my

personal seriousness and impotent efforts to create change. This research stems from my many encounters with those who experience joy and are celebrating life. As Emma Goldman stated so eloquently, "If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution." The research I am presenting are preliminary results of the first phase of a long-term project, and is a celebration of play, and how we learn to stay young, vibrant, outlandish, self-confident, virile and vital. My guiding research question is: How is the theoretical construct of lifelong learning enriched through play, especially for adults older than sixty? More importantly and quite seriously I am proposing a new theory (for now let's just accept its newness) of adult learning and adult development: *The Pedagogy of Elder Play*.

"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

George Bernard Shaw

Before I fall into the trap that I am questioning, the darkness of seriousness, I begin by stating the theoretical framework of this free-thought essay and then articulate the rules that guide this research. This framework is a combination of autoethnography (the reflective practitioner), adult learning and development, informal learning, social learning and one's search for joy. I embrace literary and scholarly liberties throughout this research, some of which free me to think and not get bogged down in such a way that my analyses gets cloudy and murky. The first rule of this theory building exercise is that I will not reduce my thinking and analyses to supporting citations. Dewey followed this rule with great success, as did Addams, Lindeman, Rauschenbusch, the Overstreets, and many others from the Progressive Era. The second rule is that even though some of my ramblings may seem circuitous or even irrational, I request that you as my readers look at this research as serious theory building.

To illustrate the pedagogy of elder play in lifelong learning I incorporate several case studies, three older men, and one (slightly) older woman who ride motorcycles. I also make antidotal references to other adults, including an Army officer who travels with a suitcase of Legos®. As a disclaimer, I personally ride motorcycles as my preferred mode of transportation and traveling, and I played with Legos® as a child so these stories are close to my own experience. The preliminary results of this research are being used to better understand this topic and will be basis to design future data-gathering methods. The first step of this research is to better understand how adults develop and learn through play, and as a result keep their brain active and their spirits high. Informal learning has a rich history in adult education dating back to Cy Houle and Malcolm Knowles in the 1950s, continuing through to contemporary research by Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins' on incidental learning, Daniel Schugurensky's

categories of informal learning (intentionality and consciousness), and Elisabeth Bennett's four-part model of informal learning (self-directed, integrative, incidental and tacit). Leona English defined informal learning as "acquisition of new knowledge, understanding, skills, or attitudes which people do on their own that has not been planned or organized in formal settings." As I reflect on how I learn, most of what I have learned that still sticks in my brain and shapes who I am has been informal. Though I remember classes and instructors, I struggle recalling what I learned in these formal settings. Yet learning brings me joy, whether it is through fly fishing, parenting and grandparenting, motorcycling, gardening, writing, and the creative arts. And at this stage in life I humbly admit that most of my learning has occurred through play.

The pedagogy of play is not new in education as there is a robust body of literature in early childhood education. For example, Elizabeth Wood defines this area of learning broadly as how teachers develop learning strategies for young children around play. She goes on to define the role of adults as merely designers, facilitators and teachers of the early childhood play curricula. Early childhood education that incorporates play is intentional, not informal, and hence there is little we can apply to how older adults learn through play. Yet for those of us who still play with young children, we understand the joy of childlike play and silly fun. Wood also fails to capture how the joy of play sparks and reignites those moments from our childhood where we would pass the time of day without purpose, enjoying the carefree experience of creative fun and imagination.

A few years ago I was riding from Manhattan to Denver, a five hundred mile journey that I typically do in nine hours. Needing a cup of coffee, I stopped at a gas station in the small farming/ranching community of St. Francis, Kansas. As I took off my helmet, I noticed a small Honda motorcycle packed to the hilt with luggage and gear. What caught my eye is that this motorcycle's top speed is about 55 MPH, it had an Ohio license plate, and it is usually thought of as a good bike to learn on, not to travel across the country on. When I went into the gas station, there was this thin older, somewhat frail looking gentleman (seventy-two years old) in riding gear. I struck up a conversation and asked him where he was going and where he had been. He told me that when he turned seventy he decided he wanted to start riding motorcycles, went to the local Honda dealer and told the salesperson that he needed a bike he could pick up if it fell over, which eliminated most touring bikes. He described how he studied, took training classes, and finally started riding. He also shared his adventures on this three-week trip across country on two-lane roads, visiting friends in the Appalachian Mountains, family in the Louisiana bayou, and children in Texas and Colorado. The joy and excitement he shared was contagious. He was passionate about these types of adventures, and this is what helped keep him young.

I started to reflect on this encounter in rural Kansas, first asking what would I be doing when I turn seventy. Would I still be riding my bike, or would my body start to weaken and at best be riding a trike. I also started to reflect on what keeps a body young: Is it creating new challenges, new benchmarks, and carving and re-carving a new state of mind? I also knew that in order to ride motorcycles you have stay hyper-focused, aware of everything around you, what that driver is thinking as his car passes you or as you come to a stop sign the focus of the driver behind you. When I ride I void my mind of all things, such as if I turned off the stove when I left house, the project on my desk that has a deadline and is far from complete, or if a family member is healing after a fall; these thoughts are set aside. For my safety, I stay focused only on my surroundings as I ride next to a Kansas cornfield, prepared for a deer to jump onto the road into my path. For me it is akin to meditation, concentrating on the here and now, synchronizing my body, mind, and immediate environment.

After I turned sixty while sitting at my desk the thought of retiring started to creep into my thoughts. What would I do? Fish? Visit grandchildren? Watch TV? I love my research but it is dependent upon my association with a university where I have access to multiple resources and am paid to think and write. Is there a research project that I can dive into, dig deep, find enjoyment, and do anywhere and at anytime? Then I recalled my passing conversation with the older gentleman riding his motorcycle across rural Kansas. His attitude toward life was younger than his years. What kept him young? Why at the age of seventy did he decide to take up motorcycling? What motivated him? During a conversation with my department chair the topic of new research came up, and the question was asked: "What new research are you working on?" Without thinking I said, *why old men ride motorcycles?*

Earlier this year I put my idea into action and wrote a proposal to our university's institutional review board to interview older adults, at least sixty years old, about their hobbies, and what and how they learn through play. To date I have interviewed four motorcyclists. The first interview was with our provost, who started riding at age forty-one and now with her husband rides all across North America for vacations. They have ridden to Banff, Utah, and have attended several rallies—large gathering of motorcyclists. Asked how she learned and developed her skill, she noted that she subscribed to motorcycle magazines, attended motorcycle safety classes (failed the first time, passed the second time) visited with other motorcyclists, and at the rallies attended workshops for women

riders. Asked why she rode she said not only was it for the challenge but also it was something she and her husband shared and enjoyed doing together. Motorcycling has become part of her identity and helps her stay young. Being a colleague and fellow researcher, we talked about my research project and evaluated the interview process. Her input provided

affirmation that this research was truly interesting and important, and she suggested that for phase two I might consider conducting a longitudinal study and observe a small group of motorcyclists for up to ten years.

My second interview was with a gentleman I met at a restaurant. He was wearing a Harley Davidson shirt, which prompted me to walk up to his table and inquire if he would be interested in being interviewed. A week later the interview took place over a cup of coffee. He owns a number of motorcycles, one for touring and several dirt bikes. He has been riding since he was teenager, nearly seventy years. Riding is something he taught his children, and now is teaching to his grandchildren. As a family they take an annual trip to Colorado and ride logging roads through the national forests. These events help bring him closer to his grandchildren and force him to stay in physical shape. He loves teaching what he knows to younger people, and forces himself to keep up with everyone when riding. Nothing like engaging in a little fun competition to challenge both your mind and body!

The third interview was with an eighty-two year old expert trials riders. Trials is a unique event, started in Spain, where the rider is faced with different types of obstacles to ride over and around. The scoring is based on how many times you put your foot on the ground or drop your bike. It's not about speed but about balance and agility. The metaphor of a ballerina on a motorcycle describes trials riding. As a farmer he like so many others in his generation has not yet retired. He still competes at regional events. On his farm he has set up a practice trials track where he regularly works on technique and balance. He also owns about forty motorcycles, mostly dirt and trials bikes, many of which were given to him once they were worn out. He has been able to revitalize almost all of them, and few that aren't working are used for parts. Having this many bikes allows him to invite friends over for rides along the river and through the woods on his farm. To keep his agility, he is also an avid ping-pong player. For him riding and competing is an integral part of his life. It is also a social activity, which he does with his son and a group of friends. He learns and maintains his skill not only through practice but also by sharing and teaching what he knows to others. On a side note, he invited me to ride with him and thought I might make a good trials rider...with some practice and instruction.

The last interview conducted for this preliminary study was with an engineering professor on campus. In his late sixties, he collects and refurbishes classic bikes. Presently he owns twelve motorcycles, and regularly rides all of them. He is not only a rider but also a mechanic, and a connoisseur of fine art—classic motorcycles that were designed not only to be functional but also beautiful. He, unlike the others who were interviewed, works and rides alone. Though he has a couple of friends who he rides with on occasion, he prefers to ride at his own pace, and enjoys the solitude of the ride. His shop is his classroom, filled with service

manuals, tools, and parts for his motorcycles. He keeps meticulous logs for each motorcycle, documenting what work has been done on each book. If he can't figure out a problem he refers to YouTube® videos, for which he claims has never failed him. His love for engineering is not confined to work and the classroom, it is also part of his hobby. He is much like the motorcyclist I met several years earlier in St. Francis: Motorcycles and motorcycling is a personal adventure that most of his close friends and family don't understand.

Though these four interviews represent just the beginning of what I anticipate will be a long-term project, there are some common themes that are beginning to emerge. The first theme is that all four interviewees are passionate about their hobby and find intense joy in what they do. The second theme is that they are active learners and continuously seeking more information so they can improve what they do. The third theme is that they are not seeking accolades or recognition; this hobby is something they are motivated to do for personal reasons. For three this hobby is very social, involves friends and family, building stronger bonds and common interests. The fourth interviewee was more of a lone wolf, akin to the soldier that I came to know in one of my classes who carried a suitcase of Legos® when wherever the Army sent him as a means to relax and escape the pressure created by his career as a professional warrior. Another theme is that all enjoyed the challenge of riding, and had experienced the adrenaline rush one experiences being one with machine facing the elements of road and trail. This adrenaline rush is possibly one of the great motivators to pursue a demanding challenge when others are retiring to their La- Z-Boy® in front of the boobtube.

Albert Bandura's social learning theory is central to what I term the pedagogy of play: "Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action." Though some like to play alone, most I suspect like to play with others as the human species is gregarious by nature. All of these motorcyclists observed and modeled others early on during the development of their hobby. The trials rider enjoys competing in organized events, not only for the personal challenge but also for the opportunity to visit with and learn from others. The provost found going to motorcycle rallies and attending workshops for women riders not only as a means to better her skills but to feel connected to a network of women riders. The Harley rider first learned through observation but now learns by modeling his craft to his children and grandchildren. And the engineer learns from observing videos and modeling behaviors of those more skilled than he. The necessary conditions of social learning theory are attention and what Bandura termed arousal that leads to retention, memory and motivation. These traits are shared in so many forms of play, whether it is marathon running, weight lifting, or contract bridge.

Why is this research important? First, there is little research on the benefits of elder play, or the pedagogy of play for older adults. Second, it aligns with the concept of informal learning and social learning, and falls within Houle's typology that all learners are primarily goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and/or learning-oriented learners. And third, as baby boomers retire they will seek new challenges that for the most part keep them socially connected and socially engaged. Boomers are not content to go from the office chair to the easy chair as future generations were; they are active and desire a full life during retirement. As adult educators, there are opportunities to not only explore through research how and why older adults learn, but also to design and create opportunities where elders can play both physically and mentally, where they build bridges and bonds with family and friends, where they observe and model, and where they continue to grow.

As adult educators today we focus on the serious, intractable problems of contemporary life. We get mired in the problems of neoliberalism, nationalism, racism, genderism, and unfettered capitalism that reward individualism, narcissism, and accentuate social inequalities. When I am depressed and angry by the news of the day, the chaos and greed that consumes families and communities, and the brutality in politics and society, I read Pablo Neruda's love poems or Nikos Kazantzakis's novels. I find inspiration in one particular quote from *Zorba the Greek*: "You have everything but one thing: madness. A man needs a little madness or else—he never dares cut the rope and be free." And of course reading George Bernard Shaw always brings a smile: "Youth is wasted on the young." My essay proposes a new adult learning theory from which we can envision how adults learn and remain passionate and joyful throughout life as lifelong learners: the pedagogy of elder play. The examples I use in this preliminary research capture only a few stories, highlighting my belief that if we reflect on and pursue what we are passionate about we will find that space where we are alive and engaged with the joy of life. For those of us closing in on retirement, or in the twilight of our career, there are opportunities through play to rediscover who we are and what we want to become. I conclude that the pedagogy of elder play is a theoretical construct not only important to child development, but also to continued adult growth and development.