



This Religion column is a regular feature written for the Gallup Independent by Gallup area residents, representing different faith communities, who share their ideas about bringing a spiritual perspective into our daily lives and community issues. For information about contributing a guest column, contact Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola at The Independent: (505) 863-6811 ext. 218 or lizreligion01@yahoo.com.

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LET'S PLAY BALL

Such is the well-used phrase of coaches and umpires calling athletic teams to action. Simple enough, it would seem. But is it? In our culture today, do we even remember what it means to “play?”

A partial answer to the question comes from Gordon Dahl, “We worship our work, we work at our play and we play at our worship.” Ouch!—we “work at our play?” On what basis can we make such a statement?

Allow me to try to make the case, but follow with an example of wholesome play.

The professional athletes, of course, hardly plays at all. It is a job for which they are often paid millions of dollars. Good athletes “work” during the entire off-season to get better at their “play” during the season.

How about the Olympic model? These folks often work for years (not “play” for years) to qualify for the Olympics. For most, there is nothing “amateur” about it—it is an obsession.

Big-time college athletics these days is loaded with exploitation, and the notion of “playfulness” being a part of Division I sports is a joke.

And the purity of high school athletics is an endangered reality. The pressure on fragile teenagers by communities, coaches and parents quickly can take the play out of the activity. To play 20 basketball games during the off season no longer cuts it—40, 50 or 60 is the standard for many high school teams these days.

All of this gloom and doom was contrasted for some of us last week Thursday, when the Rehoboth softball girls played Menaul for the regional championship at Ford Canyon. Two evenly matched teams played nose to nose into extra innings. Smiles plentiful, sportsmanship obvious, competition real.

The same spirit prevailed in the stands amongst parents and supporters from both schools. Everyone was having a dandy time cheering for kids, acknowledging good plays on both teams, and feeling sorry for those who made the occasional error.

This was all enhanced by a pleasant gentleman behind the microphone, Mr. Chavez, whose editorial comments and ongoing conversation with the crowd brought smiles to



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everyone's face. There was a playfulness about the entire event—it felt so good.

Rehoboth won the game in the bottom of the 8th inning by what seemed like divine intervention. The joy and jumping of the victors was delightful, the sadness of the other team genuine. Such is play and competition—part of it is the risk of losing.

I ask this question—how often do we see examples of such play? Do we still remember how? Do we know how to “play” ball? Or is what we see so often distorted, out of balance, lacking in moderation?

God has built play into the fabric of his creation. For us to not play is to forsake a piece of our humanity. Note the kingdom vision of Zechariah 8: 4,5: “Old men and women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with a staff in hand because of age. And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing.”

Those of us who work at our play, or don't play enough, or play too much, thereby neglecting our work, best take a look at our “playlife.”

It is certainly one of the areas of my life that is out of whack. Recently, I took a day off to go on a trail ride with my friend, Mike Mataya. We joined Hugh Williams and about 50 other horse people for a glorious day in the creation. Reminding myself that “this is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it”, I was also feeling guilty about not being at work

I comfort myself, and you, with the biblical notion that usually we need to first be thinking right about something before we can begin acting right. I am hopeful that if we begin to think right about play, we will begin to redeem the role of play in our schools, our communities, and our personal lives.

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