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Jeremy Doesn't Jump Out of Swings Anymore

John Craun

There was no way we could just walk on by. No, not on such a beautiful spring day. Matt and I realized this at the same time, and with a sideways glance at one another, we veered off the sidewalk and headed for the playground. Track practice had just ended, and we were on our way home. It was the type of day that draws the winter-wearied outdoors and fills its beholders, both young and old, with seemingly boundless energy. Matt and I climbed on the monkey bars, walked the balance beams, crawled through the tunnels, and slid down the slides. We spun round and round on the merry-go-rounds, slid down the poles like firemen, and rode the rocket ship and the horses. We got a few strange looks from mothers and children. This was to be expected, however. After all, it is not every day that you see two sixteen-year-old young men at a playground. Soon, we were drawn to the swings. As we settled ourselves into the seats, which were slightly too small, I said to Matt, "I'll have you know that I used to be the best swing jumper in the whole school." "What do you mean?" he said. "I could jump higher and further out of a swing than anyone else in my elementary school," I answered. "Here, watch this." I pushed off and began to pump my legs vigorously back and forth. I swung higher and higher until at the top of my path, I felt myself lift slightly off the swing—the perfect jumping height. I swung back again, and when I came forward I waited until I was almost at the top of my path then I let go . . .

Jeremy is my younger brother. He doesn't jump out of swings. Not many kids do these days. Childhood play is changing. In her essay, "The End of Play," Marie Winn says, ". . . a decade or two ago children were easily distinguished from the adult world by the very nature of their play, today children's occupations do not differ greatly from adult diversions." Although Jeremy and I are separated by only six years, the way he plays is very different from the way I played as a child.

I had a very traditional childhood. From what I know of how my father played as a child, I believe that I played in a similar manner to him, and probably to his father as well. My childhood days were spent romping and exploring in the woods with my dog, swimming and fishing in the creek, climbing trees, and making up games that generally involved chasing or being chased by something through the woods. I never liked being indoors very much. I always preferred to be outside. My mother tells me that I would always return from my outdoor excursions covered in dirt and grime with my knees and elbows scraped up. She says I gave her a lot of gray hair. I was always very active and had to be doing things constantly.

My parents realized that sports were a good outlet for my energies, and they encouraged my interest in athletics by getting me involved in several sports at an early age. I always enjoyed these athletic activities, although I was never particularly good at any besides running. One thing that was conspicuously absent from my childhood was a television. While most children squandered many hours in front of the TV, I read voraciously. My parents did not allow a TV in the house until I was twelve.

Jeremy is also interested in sports, but that is where our similarities end. In Jeremy's case, this interest borders on obsession. He is much more serious about and successful in athletics than I ever was. As a child, I played for fun. Jeremy plays to win. If he should happen to lose, he often goes into his room and mopes all day. Jeremy follows college, professional, and high school sports very closely. While most children would go straight for the comics in the daily paper, Jeremy always reads the sports section first. He never misses an important sporting event on TV. Even when he is just playing with a few friends in the back yard, he does not know how to relax and have fun. Last fall, he broke his friend's two front teeth playing football in the back yard. Jeremy also prefers watching TV or listening to music to frolicking and exploring outdoors as I used to do. In fact, Jeremy would probably call the made up games I played as a child "babyish." He generally behaves in a much more mature manner than I did at his age.

The lack of "childish" play in Jeremy's life concerns me, because my childhood play served to develop my imagination, creativity, and resourcefulness--qualities that Jeremy seems to lack. I hope that as Jeremy grows older, he will learn to approach life with a more "playful" attitude. For as one ages, many of the methods of childish play are forsaken; however, the person who truly understands play realizes that the activities of play are of secondary importance to the state of mind. People who are able to preserve this precious attitude seem to have several characteristics in common. They cannot pass a pretty flower without smelling it. They ride the bumper cars over and over at amusement parks. They always notice beautiful sunsets and stop whatever they are doing to admire them. They laugh a lot. They maintain a child-like fascination with simple things, for they realize that the many subtleties of life give it its wondrous beauty.

As I hung in the air for a single breathless moment, I felt the same thrill that I had for years: the same exhilaration that has motivated me to jump out of swings again and again. I came back to earth all too quickly. I landed on my feet, then flopped down on my back and just looked up at the sky and thought, "I hope that there never comes a time in my life when jumping out of a swing is no longer fun, because if that day ever comes, all the joy will have departed from my life." At the same time, I knew in my heart that day would never come, for I will forever be a swing jumper.

Bibliography

Winn, Marie, "The End of Play," in *The Little Brown Reader*, Little Brown, Boston, 1992, p.181.