

Sessions with Gwen: The Art of Play & The Artful Play of Coaching

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Introduction

I started my car, rolled down the windows, and buckled my seatbelt. It was a few minutes after 1pm on October 16, 2006, and I was leaving my home in Berkeley for the first of five ninety-minute sessions with life coach and play expert, Gwen Gordon. That's when I heard shouting coming from a man walking on the sidewalk: "Hey, can I get a lift up to Shattuck?"

Upon reflection, I can't remember the last time—if ever—I gave a stranger a lift. It's a risk-taking, yes-saying move that runs counter to my usual mood and conditioned response to life. And yet, there I was — Actually, there he was, striding confidently toward my car... as if I had already said yes! And maybe I had, several weeks ago, when I said yes to risking the liberation of my inherently playful self with Gwen.

Call it a synchronicity, the first of two events I would experience on my way to Gwen's home in Woodacre. The stranger, it turns out, is John, my almost-next-door neighbor who drinks a lot of coffee, talks real fast and, at least on our two-minute trip to Shattuck Avenue, talked non-stop about *power*: what power is; how to get power; powerful people; people who study power; and so on. The transcendental message I received by way of John was unmistakable; one of the major objectives of my work with Gwen was to become more powerful in my life, specifically by coming to a more intimate relationship with the transformative power of play.

The second synchronicity presented itself via a playing field just outside of Woodacre. I had passed the field on several occasions since it is en route to not only Gwen's home but also Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Furthermore, I had taken notice of it each time I drove by, since I am generally taken by wide-open grass fields. In fact, when I come upon a field I often internalize its breathtaking tranquility, and if it is specifically a *playing* field, I tend to have fond recollections of my days as a youth baseball and soccer player. So, it came as no surprise that on the afternoon of October 16 I once again noticed the playing field; as for the synchronicity, it was on this afternoon that—for the first time—I noticed the sign that reveals the field's name.

The field is named after Vernon Louis Gomez, affectionately known as "Lefty" Gomez, the depression-era New York Yankees pitcher who was born in Rodeo, California, died in Greenbrae, and in 1972 was elected to the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame. Now, I never met the man, but consider this: I am left-handed; I played the position of pitcher from age five to age fifteen; and I was nicknamed "Lefty" Luftig! So, without a doubt my seeing the sign was a meaningful coincidence, one meant to evoke my positive experiences of adolescent play. Not

only so, left-handedness is a foremost symbol of the negative experiences that have influenced my relationship with play. “Lefty” evokes my childhood fears, missteps, and feelings of ineptitude, all of the times I was laughed at or felt like I didn’t belong, like *I* was wrong because I lived in a world made of and meant for right-handers. Thus, seeing the sign was a synchronicity that I experienced as profound and paradoxical.

With that said, I will now proceed to recount the key experiences and insights from each of my five sessions with Gwen.

Session #1

Our first session was devoted to both clarifying the personal and interpersonal ground I wanted to cover during our engagement, and choosing a suitable method for conducting our sessions. I arrived with several possible (and mutually compatible) designs in mind. One, doing live coaching around either the obstacles to my becoming a more playful person or my life transition from full-time graduate student to full-time employee. Two, actually engaging in play forms so as to more fully realize my potential for play. Three, engaging in theoretical discussion about play in order to further the process of writing my Final Integrative Project paper. Four, receiving practical counsel on how to create a thriving life coaching practice, and especially one that would honor and incorporate play. Incidentally, Gwen and I had previously discussed these options over the phone, but did not reach any conclusions at that time; however, we did determine that no matter our course of action, I would benefit from having a copy of “Come Alive! The Artful Play of Coaching,” a training manual that Gwen created with Coaches Training Institute co-founder, Henry Kimsey-House, and generously gave to me.

By the end of my intake session with Gwen, we had agreed to keep all of the possibilities in play while focusing on the second design: experimenting with forms of play as a way to enhance my degree of playfulness. Our conversation made it clear that I would be best served by attempting to recalibrate my overall willingness and capacity to play, that doing so would serve my deep desire to be more fully and passionately engaged with life. Indeed, it became clear that I had reached out to Gwen for this reason above all others, which she is uniquely qualified to facilitate.

To make one last comment about this session, I greatly appreciated Gwen’s skillfulness as a facilitator. She listened empathetically, with a curious and open mind, asked powerful questions

that fostered self-discovery, and of great importance, expertly managed the pace of our conversation. On several occasions Gwen slowed *my* pace, bringing me back to a statement that deserved further inquiry and proved to be revelatory of my growing edge as a player. I highlight this point in order to highlight that—as indicated by the various options I envisioned for our engagement—I saw my work with Gwen as supportive of not just my own personal growth and development, but also my future role as facilitator of others’ development.

Session #2

Our second session commenced with a brief silent meditation, followed by a slightly longer recapitulation of our intention and plan of action. For the remainder of the session we rhythmically alternated between playing and reflecting on our play.

To warm-up we did free form body movement, and then added spontaneous vocalization to our movements. One observation that I made during this exercise was that my body became quite rigid, even frozen, when we concentrated on loosening our facial muscles. In other words, I felt particularly threatened by having to express myself through my face, and reacted defensively via the mechanism of freezing. I might add that in session one Gwen and I identified the experience of freezing, and of melting frozenness, as being crucial to my development as a player.

For our next exercise, Gwen and I picked different, random objects in the room, and focused our gaze on them. Then, with exaggerated emotion, each of us physically and verbally acted out a progression of events related to the objects. To illustrate, I chose a white cloud that was painted on one of the walls. Following Gwen’s instruction, I then exaggeratedly (but with all possible authenticity) displayed these emotions, listed in order of their appearance: longing for the cloud, bliss engendered by gaining possession of the cloud, avariciousness from not wanting Gwen to take it, shock and despair from having mysteriously lost it, maliciousness toward Gwen for stealing it, joy from miraculously relocating it, the loving kindness associated with gifting Gwen with the cloud, and gratitude for having been gifted with Gwen’s object.

I came away from this exercise with two powerful observations about my experience. First, out of all the emotions I displayed, avariciousness felt most odd, awkward, and phony. I believe this has something to do with the fact that I identify with Enneatype Five, and the passion (i.e., the ego-driven emotional state) of this type is avarice. I was therefore triggered and made uncomfortable by the prospect of expressing (i.e., owning) my avariciousness, especially

considering that I was magnifying it in front of another person! Second, when Gwen and I were simultaneously accusing one another of thievery, I noticed that almost right away I recoiled at her maliciousness and assumed the role of victim. Only later was I able to muster the wherewithal to fully express my feelings of hostility toward her. Of course, my experience is consistent with the tendencies of an Enneatype Five, and I entered into the exercise with abundant knowledge of how I might react in such a situation. Regardless, the effect of experiencing myself in this way, within a sacred container for self-transformation, cannot be overestimated.

Briefly, let me also name a few of the qualities that make this play form so compelling. To draw upon Ken Wilber's nondual perspective on Enlightenment in an evolving world, in my opinion *the phenomenal state of play is what Freedom feels like from the Fullness side of the Enlightenment equation*. (By comparison, I would say that the highest meditative states are what Fullness feels like from the Freedom side of the street.) In other words, when looked at as an inner attitude and affect, supreme playfulness is the capacity to express emotions freely, in all forms, to varying degrees of intensity. Thus, this exercise easily and effectively enables a person to test their level of comfort and degree of fluidity with a broad range of emotions; it also affords a quick and easy opportunity to explore emotionality from the two main perspectives of intrapsychic and intersubjective dynamics. Finally, on both counts this play form expertly enacts a principle of play that contributes to its transformative power: the repeated introduction of change, particularly unexpected and discontinuous change, into a system.

Briefer yet, a third, wordless exercise required that each of us mime an imaginary creation, morph it several times, eventually show it to one another, and then allow the other person to play with it. Subsequently, guided by only the interaction of our body language, we combined our creations into one and co-creatively morphed it until we spontaneously brought our play to an end. This play form is also extremely compelling. It is highly improvisational and without either a desired end state or a natural progression, other than what is conceived by the imagination and conveyed by the body, at first autonomously and then through communion. Owing to these qualities, I was catapulted into the realm of the unknown, where I was able to explore such profound discomforts as not knowing the "right" way to play with Gwen's creation, as well as both creating and co-creating with no function or purpose, except to continuously transform the creation (i.e., except to play!).

Session #3

At the close of session two, Gwen and I agreed that I should try wearing the facilitator hat in the next session. Thus, I led a warm-up exercise that I learned from Margaret Blackwell's course on creativity, *Dissolving Boundaries*. Also, Gwen and I took turns being the "facilitator" (or more accurately, the initiator) of two additional warm-ups. One was a "touching-into-movement" exercise where we got into a single-file line, at which time the facilitator (i.e., the person second in line) made split-second contact with some part of the other person's body. (We used our hands to make contact, although I believe we could have used another body part to initiate contact.) Induced by the touch of the facilitator, this person immediately begins moving through the space in whatever way their psychophysical organism responds, so long as the movement is amplified. (I believe we added vocalization to the movement after a while.) At some point the "mover" stops, and then the process is repeated. The other exercise was "babbling," where one person invents a nonsensical topic—e.g., the diet of gigantic ants in the Siberian winter—that the other person must talk about for approximately one minute.

One of the two highlights of session three was facilitating "What's in the box?" As I have described elsewhere, this dyadic play form challenges partners to reframe perspectives and convert possibility into actuality in rapid-fire fashion, based on a continual loop of question and response. For instance, as the questioner I would start by asking Gwen, "What's in the box?" to which she would reach in an imaginary box and swiftly pull out... "Balloons." I would immediately offer another action-inquiry, something like, "Throw the balloons against the wall. They pop, and turn into what?" Gwen would act out the behavior and reply... "Shoestrings," to which I would offer yet another action-inquiry, and so on. (As an aside, when our roles were reversed, one of my replies prompted both of us to burst into hysterical laughter. I forget the object that Gwen asked me to transform, but whatever it was, it was turned into... "Shreds of evidence!")

Gwen remarked on how well I did as facilitator (i.e. the questioner) of "What's in the box?" Apparently she often has to give her partner more coaching in order to initiate and sustain the game. Whatever the case, I was happy with my performance, exhilarated by playing, and fascinated by a single moment of our play. The details are foggy, but the gist of the matter was that one of Gwen's replies intimated that she was stuck in mud, and strangely enough, I got stuck, too! After having rapidly offered numerous action-inquiries, I literally went blank, and

said something to the effect of, “You’re stuck! Oh shit, what do you (read *I*) do when you’re stuck!” I am not sure what to make of this event, and would welcome feedback from readers.

As for the other highlight of session three, the last thirty or so minutes turned into a veritable Diamond Approach inquiry, during which I encountered “The Beast” (i.e., myself as the cold destroyer of everything, including myself) and “The Alien” (i.e., myself as a vulnerable little child). The inquiry was sparked by my reflection that my inner critic was operative during the “What’s in the box?” game, judging my play as unoriginal or crazy, such that I could detect a faint felt sense of panic, as if “things were falling apart” (for myself as the little child). Gwen and I pursued these subpersonalities and states of consciousness, and a decisive moment was when I recognized an internal “laughing at” impulse (i.e. The Beast) that preceded my rational inclination to have compassion for myself as a scared, defenseless child. Long story short, the inquiry was intense, and I am grateful for Gwen’s ability to hold and facilitate me as I navigated these challenging intrapsychic worldspaces.

Session #4

I emailed Gwen on the morning of our fourth session and expressed my desire to have a theoretically oriented session, in part because I was in a contracted state, also because I wanted to stay immersed in the process of writing my paper. Gwen replied by saying that we could play with whatever I liked and needed, and so the direction of session four was set (although when we met later that day we began with playful warm-ups, and agreed to keep all of our possible designs in play.)

As is often the case when playing on an authentic playground, “the unexpected” made its presence felt during our session. Gwen began by inviting me to talk about “where I was at,” that is, to talk about either or both of the conditions I had cited in my email. I chose to discuss my contracted state, which stemmed from financial worries related to my life transition from full-time graduate student to full-time employee. Approximately fifteen minutes into our discussion, Gwen suddenly had the intuition that she should facilitate me through a perspective taking exercise. Without saying much more, she asked if I was open to going along with her intuition, and I said yes.

We therefore devoted the balance of our session to doing live coaching, albeit truly a version of Gwen’s “artful play of coaching.” Her perspective taking exercise entailed that we both come

to our feet. She then took a magic marker to a blank piece of construction paper, and with my permission wrote, “making a living.” This was the core issue that we were formerly discussing, that would now become the centerpiece of our play. Next, Gwen placed the paper in the center of the rug on which we had been playing all along, and invited me to inhabit a first-person perspective on making a living. She asked, in other words, what thoughts do I have about making a living? What feelings and emotions are present? I was encouraged to embody and even dramatize my perspective, as opposed to merely speaking it as if I was engaged in an ordinary conversation.

Every time I inhabited a unique perspective that consisted of correlated thoughts and emotions, Gwen would write the perspective on a piece of paper and place the paper on the rug—and the labeling (and sometimes identifying the psychological makeup) of each perspective was an art form in itself. For instance, I took the perspective of, “I can’t *play* for a living,” which we identified as an ego deficiency state. Also, I took the perspective of, “I won’t find what I want... there’s no point in looking,” which we identified as a defeatist state having its origin in my experience as an infant. When all was said and done, I had played out seven distinct perspectives on making a living, literally leaping back and forth from one perspective to another to gain insight into how I was handling the issue, and how the issue was handling me!

I might add that a couple of the perspectives I took were more healthy and evolved, like “I’m open to exploring something new,” and “I can do this... I’m in the game... Now I’m playing!” Interestingly enough, for all of my study of authentic spirituality, it took Gwen’s prompting for me to inhabit a transpersonal perspective on making a living. Thanks to her facilitation, I was able to embody, “I am a gift... gratitude for being... making a living is one expression of Being.” As parting commentary on this dynamic exercise, commentary that places it squarely within the field of coaching, Gwen invited me to pick one perspective to commit to inhabiting over the next two weeks (and beyond). I chose to integrate two perspectives, the last two that I named, because although the transpersonal perspective elicited my essential quality of sweetness, it left me yearning for the pragmatic gusto of “I can do this!”

Session #5

For a change, all that Gwen and I did during session five was talk. Really, we talked at length about the theory and practice of play. And that was fine by me, since I was entering the home

stretch of writing my paper, “A Praxis of Everything: Playing with AQAL Post-Metaphysics.” As it happens, in that paper I was unable to incorporate my perspectives on play. But I intend to present them as either a sequel to “A Praxis of Everything” or as part of a curriculum that I am developing for a one-unit course on Integral Play, or both. I even have long-term ambitions to write or edit a book on play as a vehicle for psychospiritual transformation. My working title is, *Play with Your Self: A Manifesto for Adult Maturation*.

Conclusion

Put simply and lightly, playing with Gwen was a blast! I extend my thanks to her for, well, just being who she is, and for facilitating my growth and development as a player. As a result of our play, I am even more committed to exploring and expanding my playfulness, and empowering others to do the same. On that count, I feel called to conclude with the following share: In our last session, Gwen mentioned her interest in collaborating with me on an “Enneagram and Play” workshop—suffice it to say that I hope we can bring the workshop to fruition. Stay tuned...