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MY PLAN TO PLAY: A PERSONAL JOURNEY TOWARDS A LIFETIME OF PLAY

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

AIMEE D. BLAQUIERE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2010

Critical and Creative Thinking Program

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ABSTRACT

MY PLAN TO PLAY: A PERSONAL JOURNEY TOWARDS A LIFETIME OF PLAY

December 2010

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Directed by Dr. Nina Greenwald

In my first Critical and Creative Thinking course, I chose to explore singing and performing meaningful songs with my father as a form of creative thinking. This project led to the realization that, as an adult, I had forgotten what it was like to play. With this acknowledgement, I was prompted to explore underlying reasons for why my capacity to play was blocked in the first place. In doing so, I explored play theories and reflected on my own forms of play, as a basis for understanding how to successfully re-introduce play into my life. Through metacognitive reflection, this synthesis describes the journey to recapturing my creatively playful self – from the point of recognizing its loss, to identifying significant underlying blocks, to devising and applying effective strategies for removing them.

Before my reflective journey could proceed, it was important to explore the complex meaning of play and its importance to both children and adults. Despite the many definitions and theories of play by Brannen, Csikszentmihalyi, Vygotsky, and others, I decided that to create a lifelong practice of play, I first would need to establish my own conception of creative play: one that involves an expression of music, dance, writing, and a reconnection with my childhood play. Next, I explored the importance of play, especially unstructured play in children, and its benefits. I discovered that there seems to be no reason why these same benefits, including increased intellectual, social, physical, and emotional capabilities, could not apply to adults as well.

After this process of examination, I made a plan to actively play again through music, dance, writing, and my work as a communications professional, through a series of specific projects. Through weekly written reflections on playful projects, I describe the journey to rediscovering my ability to play. In my project, I explore how each of these experiences helped me to be myself again and overcome significant creative blocks, such as fear of failure, fear of being judged, and negative self-talk. In reconnecting with my own kind of creative play, new ways to keep it alive are discovered that will enrich my life beyond the Critical and Creative Thinking program. In addition, I hope to inspire others to find ways to reconnect with their own forms of play.

This project is dedicated to Gertrude M. Blaquiere,
who continues to play at the age of 83.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I reminisce about my childhood, I remember what I loved to do: sing, dance, act, write, and perform. I loved to rehearse on stage and become a new character, and then portray that character to an audience. I cherished the types of friendships I made in this space, because it felt like we had a space to trust one another. We could follow the director, and perform on stage to the best of our abilities; but the minute we left the stage, we played around and spent a lot of time in between performances with each other. I miss the sense of accomplishment that I felt when I had performed without any mistakes. Or when I acted in a sad scene and other people could feel my emotions from the stage. In particular, I remember this feeling after I performed as Maria in “The Sound of Music” my junior year of high school, and saw a crowd of audience members waiting for me outside the auditorium to tell me that when I cried on stage, they cried with me. This was also the first time that I had ever been asked for my autograph from little girls who believed in my performance and me. It was a feeling of intense self-pride and happiness for receiving praise from others for something that I loved doing.

As I graduated high school and started college, I found myself in a place where the thought of even auditioning for a play or musical paralyzed me. Part of this was because of the transition between high school and college; I left my comfort zone, where I had established myself as a “star,” and now I had to prove myself to complete strangers. Part of this was also because I was adjusting to the life of a college student and making decisions by myself for the first time. At this point as an adult, I had gotten to a place where I was too scared of others’ judgment to do what I wanted to do; when, ironically, I would have thought that as an adult I would finally be doing everything I wanted. In addition to the external factors (work, time

commitments) that led to my loss of creative play, I also experienced internal factors (such as self-doubt, making false comparisons with others) that may have affected me even more seriously. I have always been a perfectionist, and while it has benefited me in some ways by making me ambitious and thoughtful, it has also been a creative barrier to me. I am sometimes too scared to start a new project because I am too scared that what I do will not be perfect. I have also been affected by a false cultural belief that as we get older, we lose our chance to be creative and explore creative play; that play is only for children. By exploring the reasons why adults may lose their connection with their creative play, and why I myself lost that connection, I hope to find a way to reconnect.

In the fall of 2008, I took my first course in the UMass Boston Critical and Creative Thinking program, "Creative Thinking" with Senior Lecturer Nina Greenwald. In this course, I was able to utilize music and dance in two substantial projects: the biography project, in which I chose to present Ella Fitzgerald's creative life through a dance; and the final project, in which I performed music with my father. Taking this course came at a crucial point in my life when I had (almost) accepted that as an adult, I needed to focus on my career, my relationships, my education, and my health... and nothing else. In our transition from childhood to adulthood, we are urged to abandon activities that we enjoy to "settle down to business"; however, in the process of hindering our own creativity, we are actually sabotaging our self-actualization and decreasing our optimal productivity (McCormick & Plugge, 1997). The problem with my focus on my career was that I always felt like something was missing. The missing piece was that I had forgotten what it was like to play, and actively devote myself to exploring my creativity in a way that is playful, joyful, and mandatory for my happiness. At the start of this synthesis project, in the spring of 2010, I was at a stage in my life where I felt like I had made some connection back to my playful self, but if I didn't take the time to actively make a commitment to it then, I might lose it again. Brannen (2002) tells us that we need to make promises to ourselves to play, and that keeping these promises is a gift we give to ourselves. My focus on why adults "lose" their

creative play, how they can get it back, and how I myself can find it again is more than a project to me; it is my inspiration for happiness.

What is Creative Play: How Others Define Play vs. How I Define Play

When I first began this project, I had a hard time trying to label what I was trying to describe as my play. I felt that unless I could pinpoint exactly what my idea of creative play was, I couldn't move forward with a deeper understanding of my own goals. To help you understand more about my metacognitive evolution towards a definition of creative play for myself, I would like to let you in on my thought process. Initially, I wanted to call it "creative personal development or growth," because to me, this phrase invoked images of my younger self involved in acting, singing, and dancing lessons that led to performances. I thought about this creativity as a way to develop myself, because in addition to it being a joyful experience for me, it also involved the refinement of skills. However, I needed to give more thought to the relationship between skill-building and play. Next, I altered my own definition to "creative acts of artistic expression," a term that I found in my research about creativity. This seemed to narrow my focus, as it was specifically referring to artistic expression, and how I was defining my specific type of play with regard to performance arts. At this point, however, I stumbled upon two more theories that made me think that maybe I was becoming too focused. Although I was trying to justify my creative acts by making them seem more productive, I later discovered that this does not have to be the point of play at all.

While play can include this type of skill building or refinement in its definition, most play isn't meant to focus on building skills, rather, it's meant to focus on the feelings that a person experiences while playing (although skill building can be an important benefit to play). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has developed a theory that he calls "flow," wherein creativity and play are looked at more as "optimal experiences," where people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it. He adds that we need to learn how to enjoy everyday life without diminishing other people's chances to enjoy theirs. When we experience flow, our "self" becomes more complex as we allow for more flexibility and more freedom for the sake of the action, without any ulterior motives. I felt instantly that I was getting closer to what I was

looking for: a reminder that these childhood creative activities were so important that nothing else mattered to me while I was participating in them.

Building upon the idea of "flow" is the term "heart play," which was coined by Brannen (2002). She describes "heart play" as being totally in the moment; being engaged in an activity that involves no unwelcome work, comes without responsibility, and creates a feeling of ecstasy that may not be apparent to anyone but you. As adults, we sometimes feel that playing makes us irresponsible, because we are not doing something that others would consider "productive" with our time. "Heart play" is individualistic, can be productive or not productive, and is meant to invoke joy and the complete losing of one's sense of time. How will you know if you have found your heart play? You will experience feelings of total abandonment; no worries; joy; clear thinking; energy; curiosity; wonderment; pride; connection; movement; imagination; relaxation; and it will feel therapeutic. What I felt missing was not the refinement of skills; what I was missing was my heart play.

After allowing myself to be open to the possibility of multiple definitions of creativity and play, I finally settled on the term "creative play" to describe what I was searching for, (although I do still use the term "play" as well). When I refer to creative play, I am referring to *my* type of creative play, which involves revisiting creative activities of my past (dancing, singing, writing), and allowing myself to find enjoyment in them again. Even with this individualized definition, I am still thinking about the perceptions of creative play by others. There are varying perspectives on whether one should incorporate creative play into their adult lives. Some people may see play as negative because it seems like it is not a productive way to use one's time (they should be working, relaxing, spending time with friends and family, producing something). They may see it as negative because it seems unattainable as an adult and potentially selfish. Acting upon creative play can be a risk because we often see it as leaving our comfort zone in order to do something that is challenging. Some people may see play as positive because it allows you to make time for yourself to do something that is ultimately enjoyable to

you, and they can see that being selfish can be a good thing (why should we feel guilty about bettering ourselves?).

I see play as both positive and negative: it is something that I want to continue to achieve and incorporate into my life, but at this point, it is adding to my to-do list and I am starting to worry that I might not be able to commit to it how I want to. This feeling is a barrier to my own creative progress, because I am giving myself excuses for why I might not play in the future, whereas if I was really engaged in play, I wouldn't be thinking about commitments or my to-do list. To overcome this negative feeling towards play, I am looking at myself as a work-in-progress, or perhaps a "creative player-in progress." I am looking at both the big and the small ways that I can begin to incorporate play into my life. I am also confronted with the fact that after I graduate from the Critical and Creative Thinking program, I will have to try even harder to find the time to engage in creative play in my life. I have been fortunate to consider the projects that I created in this program as a form of play; what will I do when I don't have the challenges of a classroom environment to remind me to play? Before finding the answers to my future play, I would first like to consider why adults lose their sense of play and why I feel as though I had lost my creative play as well.

Chapter Outline

This synthesis project has been divided into four chapters that each serve to outline my journey of re-introducing play into my life. In chapter 2, I will examine why adults stop playing in their transition from childhood; this will include factors such as their environment, emotions related to play, self-concepts, and age-related misconceptions. I will then explore the relationship between studies on the benefits of play for children and link this research to the benefits of play for adults. In chapter 3, I will metacognitively reflect on my own reasons for losing the play in my life. This chapter, and its subchapters, is the heart of my paper, because not only do I set out a plan to bring play back into my life, but I also reflect on different ways that I play while I am simultaneously preparing this project. I will exercise my creative play through the outlets of music, dance, writing, and my workplace. The last chapter is a summation of my journey to play

again and my look to the future. In this chapter, I re-examine my own creative blocks, look back to a re-awakening of play through the Critical and Creative Thinking program, and briefly imagine my next steps to continue this pathway to more playing.

CHAPTER 2

A DISCUSSION OF THE LITERATURE BEHIND PLAY

Why Do Adults Stop Playing?

Although there are many individual reasons why adults stop playing, one of the factors that can lead to a loss of perceived creativity or creative freedom as a person transitions from childhood to adulthood is the environment that they are in, in both stages of life. According to research by Olzweski-Kubilus (2000), some children succeed academically in school when they come from households that are cohesive and child-centered, where the parents have strong bonds with their children. On the other hand, this study also shows a tendency for highly creative performing children to come from families where there are tense relationships, dysfunction, or unconventional parenting. The reasoning for this correspondence between high academic achievers in stable homes and high creative achievers in unstable homes could potentially correspond to how a person reacts to their environment. When children grow up in the latter environment, they are sometimes inclined to have a stronger motivation to obtain power (obtain more control over their environment and in relation to those around them), which can result in creativity. The types of support and the general home environment of us as children plays a large role in whether we will continue to be highly creative as adults, based on the different motivational and situational factors that we faced in the past, and whether play was valued.

Our internal emotions also affect our perceived creativity level and our desire to pursue creative play or not. Negative emotions can hinder us in expressing our creativity, but they can also inspire us to use creative play as a way to handle or overcome that emotion in a therapeutic way. For example, if we find that a situation is making us upset, we could use play as a way to brainstorm and imagine ways to improve that situation. These negative emotions can create

“powerful self-reflective thought and perseverance, leading to increased creativity” (Akinola & Mendes, 2008). Examples of these types of negative emotions can be feelings of sadness, depression, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, or self-criticism. Our negative emotions can manifest by creating blocks or barriers to our creativity. Creative blocks can be seen as both the inability to finish existing projects and the inability to start new creative projects. Some of the emotional and attitudinal barriers could be fear of taking risks (a risk could lead to a failure); fear of uncertainty and ambiguity; differences in values and needs; and personal characteristics that produce conflict (Davis, 1986). It is oftentimes just as hard for us to be flexible in our thinking and accept ambiguity as it is for us to accept failure. We are also sometimes our own biggest critic. In The Artist's Way, Cameron calls the negative self-talk that we give ourselves, "blurts." She insists that we confront these blurts head-on to overpower their impact, by addressing them out loud and turning them into positives (1992). By confronting them, we acknowledge that there is something that we may not have realized we were doing to ourselves to sabotage our creative play.

Several examples of positive emotions that affect our perceived creativity can be happiness, hopefulness, feelings of encouragement or support from others, or self-confidence. One way to actively change negative emotions, such as self-doubt, into positive emotions, such as confidence, is by using affirmations. These affirmations can be used in a meditation, spoken aloud to a group or alone, or even written in a journal. I have found that hearing these affirmations after a yoga class is helpful to me because I have tried to clear my mind of all other distractions. These affirmations are powerful messages that allow a person to think through problems in a realistic way and realize that no one is alone in the emotions that they feel (Beattie, 1996). The imagery invoked by the words is done in a way that many people can relate to and visualize the concepts; i.e. the feeling of change that is invoked by the visualization of icicles melting from a frozen tree at the end of winter and the tree blossoming with flowers in springtime. By focusing on positive emotions, this can allow a person to have the self-

confidence to take a risk with less self-doubt or fear; the fear can be interpreted as the icicles that are slowly melting away to reveal a person's inner self, the blossoming tree.

In addition to the emotions that we feel about ourselves, there are also the emotions that we experience in relation to those around us. Brannen (2002) says that some people have trouble getting back into their play because they're afraid that others will make fun of them. This is something that I touched upon earlier when I reflected on my feelings of being judged by others and too being too scared to start a creative play project for fear that I wouldn't be able to do it perfectly. I had set-up unrealistic standards for myself based on what I perceived others (parents, teachers, or peers) were expecting from me. In reality, these expectations do not exist, because the majority of people that I have surrounded myself with are actually very supportive. We are human and we make mistakes; but sometimes it's easier to criticize others that have taken a creative risk when we ourselves have not. People will judge us regardless of the decision that we make in relation to our play and how we express it. Because everyone's creative play is different, we can't expect everyone to agree or even find value in our creative play. It is ours, something that we alone hold onto, and if someone wants to criticize it, we have to learn to think that they're entitled to their opinion, even if it's different from our own.

Richard Feynman (1988) discusses the idea of listening to your inner voice in his book, What Do You Care What Other People Think? He does so by explaining his own upbringing in which honesty was valued and his father taught him how the world worked, beyond simply knowing the names of objects or processes of life. In particular, Feynman describes his relationship with a woman named Arlene, wherein he tells her, "We should listen to other people's opinions and take them into account. Then, if they don't make sense and we think they're wrong, then that's that!" Throughout this chapter, he keeps going back to that same wisdom, of letting go and allowing yourself to be free of the negative opinions of others. There's a difference between acknowledging another person's opinion and believing everything that they say, regardless of what you feel is the truth. While I would not want to discount what others may say regarding my creative play through constructive feedback, what I make of this creative play

is for my own benefit and my opinion should be the one I listen to most. My own creative play is defined generally by singing, dancing, writing, and being silly. Any activity including these criteria are my own creative play, regardless of what others consider to be their own play, or play in broader terms.

As adults, we can always find rational excuses for why creative play isn't a part of our lives. In terms of exploring creative play, each generation has different qualities that make them unique from one another, and these generational factors could affect the way that we view creative play. Within each of these generations and their overall perceptions of creativity, there are also other factors, such as age and level of commitments (importance of a career, starting a family, retirement) that affect the way that people pursue their play. In the future, I would like to explore more research in how different age groups can re-activate and sustain their creative play. Unfortunately, the majority of currently available research is about children and creativity, creativity in the workplace (but not necessarily creative play), or older adults and creativity. Despite these limitations, I have decided to first briefly explore the relationship between creative play and older adults, since they may have been creatively blocked for a longer time than children.

Several studies show that older adults benefit from programs that stimulate their creativity, because they are activating their creative thinking, and finding ways to incorporate it into their lives (Goff, 1992). While it is relevant to know that even if an adult loses their sense of creative play it is never too late to regain it, I am currently more interested in regaining this play while simultaneously dealing with issues of careers, family life, and the transition from children to adults. Instead of one generation having it easier than the other generations to pursue creative play, maybe it is just that each generation pursues creative play in a different way. Younger adults feel that they need to stop playing to be taken more seriously; middle-aged adults feel that they need to focus on their career and their family and that they don't have the time to play; and older adults feel like maybe it is too late for them to start playing again. Regardless of the age group or generation, there are always ways in which as adults, we feel blocked.

Surprisingly, children can also feel as though their creative play is blocked. There is a point in time in our childhood where we start realizing that others will critique our creative play if we let them. This critique from others often leads to our own self criticism. In The Dot, a children's book by Peter Reynolds (2003), the author tells the story of a young girl who is sitting in art class with a blank piece of paper. She claims that she can't draw. The teacher tells her to "just make a mark and see where it takes you." The young girl does this, and later finds out that her teacher has framed the picture of her dot and hung it on the wall. When the young girl realizes this, she tells herself that she can make a better dot than that one, and is inspired to create more types of dots in varying colors and sizes, eventually leading to her own collection of artwork inspired by the original dot. She experiments with the types of dots, and in her playing around with this theme, she creates something that is meaningful. At the end of the story, the young girl passes along the idea to a young boy that claims he cannot draw, by asking him if he can draw a line. This story reminds me of my own creative block of being a perfectionist and not wanting to start a project because I do not think of myself as a creative artist, so my project may not be as good as someone who identifies as an artist. Even children can feel negative emotions of their own abilities, and subsequently they sabotage their own creativity. When we look at a situation differently, as in, I am not setting out to do some creative play, but it might happen along the way, then we are opening our minds to the possibility that we are in fact creative. It is sad to me that these feelings of self-doubt of our own creative abilities can happen to us so early in life.

Although they are varied in some respects, there are certain attributes that connect the different theories of play discussed in this chapter. While one's inclination to play may be determined in part by their upbringing and environment (Olzweski-Kubilus, 2000), there is also a part of play and creativity that is determined by a person's attitude. The emotions that we experience with regard to play are critical to our actions of play, because these emotions can lead us to be a risk-taker or be bound by our fears. We can teach ourselves to control our "blurts," to change them into positive affirmations to ourselves, leading us to overcome some of the self-

doubts that can block our creativity (Cameron, 1992). Play seems to be a dialogue between one's inner self and the self that is portrayed to others. We have our own standards for how our play should unfold, but we are also prone to the judgments of others. As Feynman (1988) exclaims, what do we care what other people think? This preoccupation with the opinions of others can fuel harmful negative emotions, self-doubts, and fears. Our relationship with our play can always be changed into a positive and developing relationship, one that we can continue to nurture to increase our own sense of self and happiness.

What Are the Benefits of Play?

In Lev Vygotsky's work on play theory, he concluded that play has two critical features that, when combined, describe that uniqueness of play in a child's development. These features are that 1) representational (make-believe) play creates an imaginary situation that can allow a child to understand unrealized desires, and 2) this play contains rules for behavior that children must follow to successfully act out the play (in Berk, 1994). This research, in addition to later research by other psychologists and play theorists, finds that the benefits of play for children help to shape their development into adults, which is a critical process. Play can be used to enhance a learning experience for children; through play, children can develop essential life skills, such as problem solving, reasoning, literacy, cooperation, and sharing (Linn, 2008). This theory makes sense to me, because I remember playing myself as a child and learning how to change or adapt my play in order to cooperate with other children that I wanted to play with.

Play also gives children an opportunity to use creativity to develop their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength in a way that they are able to further learn how to interact with a world that they are still in the process of navigating. Children can try out "adult roles" with play and pretend, that can help lead to an increased confidence and resiliency to face future challenges (Ginsberg, 2006). Often times, we see children playing "adult", such as games of "house" (wherein there is a mother, father, and of course, baby), which also helps children to put themselves in another person's shoes to really see a situation from an adult point of view (or what their perceived adult point of view is). These types of skills also

help us as we become adults, because they can help us realize the career path that we would like to take in life. According to an article by Kenneth Ginsberg (2006), on behalf of the Committee on Communications and the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, undirected child-driven play allows children to learn about group dynamics, resolve conflicts, practice decision-making skills, and to find out for themselves the passions in which they are most interested. Play, both for children and adults, is an exploratory process in which we can engage our curiosity in ways in which we do not necessarily feel free to do in other structured or formal situations. It is interesting to note that all of these researchers emphasize the importance of children using “make-believe” play, in which they are more focused on creating their own play world, rather than adapting to a play world that has been established by others.

By allowing ourselves to engage in an activity that provides us joy, we are giving ourselves a reward for spending many of our hours doing the things that we feel obligated to do, like work or school. With play we are focusing on an activity that is uniquely satisfying to us, despite external motivations or hindrances, and when we include play in our lives, we can live more satisfying lives. In a report from the Alliance for Childhood (2009), there is a discussion of research which shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play have greater language skills, social skills, increased empathy and imagination, and more of the social skills to understand others than non-players. They also show less signs of aggression, more self-control, and higher levels of thinking (Miller and Almon, 2009). This shows that including play in our lives has both social and intellectual benefits.

Play has been studied by psychologists to determine the psychological effects that it has on both children and adults. The act of play can allow our brain to exercise its flexibility, to maintain and renew the neural connections that embody our potential to adapt to new environmental conditions. Psychologically, the use of play could potentially have a role in how adults subconsciously choose their mates; when a man plays, his playfulness could be seen as a way to show another person that although he is protective, he is not threatening. When a woman plays, this could be seen as an indicator of youthfulness, which is attractive to others (Marano,

1999). Play has additional benefits than just the intrinsic rewards that a person experiences by engaging in it.

Using play in our lives also benefits our physical and mental health. In a study by Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman in the 1920's to examine the lives of gifted children, those who were still surviving in the late 1990's were the ones who had played the most throughout their lives (Marano, 1999). Increasing the amount of time that children play in school (rather than decreasing it so that children have more time during the day to study for placement exams), could even help them to make healthier choices in their lives. Play can be an active form of entertainment, and it has been suggested that encouraging children to play in an unstructured environment may increase physical activity levels in children, which could ultimately play a role in decreasing the childhood obesity epidemic (Ginsberg, 2006). This type of play could involve walking, running, or even dancing in order to meet the needs of that particular play situation. As these researchers show, the simple act of playing can be an exercise for both our minds and our bodies as well.

In The Girl with the Brown Crayon, Paley (1997) details her creative journey throughout her last year as a kindergarten teacher, wherein she allowed her students, and one girl in particular, to lead lessons and playtime. Paley let go of the authority that comes with a traditional teaching role, and focused more on what she could learn from her students. By allowing herself to get enveloped in the notion of one author (Lionni, 1910 -1999, and his many children's books), she played alongside her students and found out that in their play, they were developing highly intellectual concepts and ideas of learning. In her play, she reconnected with her inner child and let go of the role of teacher in exchange for the role of fellow explorer. As a reader, we are allowed to take a peek at Paley's journey in discovering the way a child's sense of play can connect to adult learning and understanding. Reading this story helped me to get a sense of how one person's risk-taking in their work environment can lead to more learning and creative play than they could have imagined. It also made me examine some of the ideas that I could let go of to further explore my own play, such as the idea that play has to result in a perfect product, or

that we have to succeed on the first try. This desire to be perfect most likely stemmed from having a competitive nature with my brother growing up, an early addiction to praise from parents and teachers, or from my own self-critical nature.

For me, play is important in helping me *feel* like myself and reconnect with my inner self. I have fond memories as a child and teenager, when play was not only valued, but encouraged by adults. I feel like our society is harboring some serious misconceptions about the value of play, in favor of productivity, work-driven goals, and an increasingly technological world. If we have computers with an internet that allows us to find the answers to all of our questions, will this stop us from thinking for ourselves or imagining the potential answers on our own? As an adult, I have felt like I am often too caught up in my day-to-day activities of work, socializing, exercising, and running errands that I am not stopping to become more aware of my play. In the past, I have had trouble making the time for play, because it can be very time-consuming. Rediscovering my creative play, in the context of what I now better understand are its important functions, is especially beneficial to me because it will make me happier, potentially healthier, and renew my spirit.

I value both the physical types of play (which for me, would be dancing), and the mental types of play (playing with words, humor, creative thinking). I would like to increase both types of play in my life in order to benefit my psychological and physical health. I would like to increase the flexibility of my thinking and tear down some of the mental blocks that stop me from fully exploring my creative play. I would also like to break down the barrier of fear of taking risks in the type of play that I pursue. I do not want a fear of failure to prevent me from participating in a play activity that will ultimately bring me a lot of enjoyment. By overcoming these blocks, I will increase my own confidence in myself, which will allow me to more willingly include play in my daily life.

CHAPTER 3

WHY DID I STOP PLAYING AND HOW DO I PLAN TO PLAY AGAIN?

If I could pinpoint a time when I stopped playing as much, I would probably think back to a time when I was first starting to care about what other people thought and how they judged me. It was when I first started to develop self-consciousness about the perceptions of my peers and my parents or other authority figures. I wanted to be seen by peers as being “cool”, which at an age of 12 or 13 meant that I was fitting in with others and that I behaved in a way that was socially acceptable to them. I felt different from my peers, because I was very conscientious about what I said in front of them, and often hid behind a shyness that allowed me to be quiet; if I didn’t say anything at all, then I couldn’t say anything wrong. I wanted to be seen by my parents and teachers as a high-achieving person, both academically and in the activities that I pursued. My parents valued education highly, because both of them were the first in their families to graduate from college. They were both independent and took control of their own futures outside of their families, which was something that I looked up to them for. There weren’t any real consequences to my not performing well in school or at home; I usually punished myself by screaming and locking myself in my room if I got in trouble at home, so that I was essentially in control of my own punishment. I was (and still am) very in touch with my emotions, which most likely had to do with my need to be perfect as well. While I enjoyed both learning and engaging in singing, dancing, and theater, I was also driven by a need to be perfect. If I was not the best, then I at least wanted to be one of the best. I was also competing with an older brother who was also a good student and interested in music and art.

Although I am trying to reconnect with the experiences of my childhood play, I am now looking at those experiences in a light which is different than how I understood these experiences as a teenager. I am looking to experience play without the anxiety of perfection, the worry over what others will think of me, and without the necessary approval of my parents. I have learned as an adult that there is no such thing as perfection in a person. I have found that most adults have their own worries about what others are thinking of them, and are often times more concerned with their own lives than the lives of others. I have also discovered, or perhaps finally accepted, that my parents are already proud of me and that they are supportive of my life no matter what path it takes, because they love me unconditionally. While it is hard to let go of some of my previous misconceptions of the world around me, it is a continual learning process that a person usually experiences as they grow older and understand that there are more important things in life than the opinions of others around them.

The Critical and Creative Thinking program has helped me to connect with some of the positive aspects of my past self, and most namely, my creative play. I have learned more about myself through the practice of reflection and through risk-taking in a supportive environment. A lot of the play that I am exploring this semester involves a lot of risk for me, because I am challenging myself to undertake forms of creative play that I had previously given up. I am struggling with my own self-belief and whether I will fail (i.e. be imperfect) at something I was once good at, or find that I am actually better now that I am older. I am also learning that failure and success are measured by my own thoughts, and not always how I perform; sometimes what others might see as a failure on the outside is actually a success for me because I took a risk and allowed myself to try something that I had previously built up a wall against. A success to me now is when I allow myself to play without my own self-judgment and/or inference from the expectations of others whose beliefs, expectations, and criteria for success have little or no relevance to me. As Feynman (1988) says, why should I care what other people think?

I have been able to question my own reasons for not engaging in creative play by watching my three-year-old niece, Lillian, develop her own creative play. When I play with her,

I am reminded of myself at that age: filled with endless possibilities for play, an imagination that didn't stop because something seemed unrealistic, and a self-concept that wasn't based on what other people (peers, the expectations of adults) thought, but just what I myself thought. It is bittersweet for me to play with her, because as I see myself at her age, I am reminded of how much I have let the judgment of others affect my own self-concept. Lillian indulges in the truest form of creative play, because she can play the same game for hours. She especially likes to play a game with myself and her Uncle David (my fiancé) wherein I am the Mama Bird, Uncle David is the Papa Bird, and she is the Baby Bird. Uncle David and I build a "nest" for her by lying on opposite ends of the couch with our knees bent and forming an opening for her to sit in the middle. Our "Baby Bird" sits in the nest, but after about 10 seconds, she inevitably jumps out of the nest and "tweets" her way over to the other room. Papa Bird and I call out for Baby Bird, "No, please don't leave us! We miss you! Come back, Baby Bird! Tweet, tweet, tweet!" Soon enough, Baby Bird flaps her wings and comes back to us, diving into the nest head first. This same sequence of events goes on for as long as we can handle it, or at least until Lillian needs to get ready for bed, take a bath, or eat dinner. Then as adults, we trick the Baby Bird into becoming a little girl again, who has to be productive with her time and do what the adults tell her to do. This trickery usually ends in a temper tantrum from one sad Baby Bird.

Reconnecting with Play as an Adult

One idea to become motivated to regain creative play as an adult is to find a support group, or to create a support system, both internally and externally. A support system could even be found by looking back to the support systems of our childhood. In *The Artist's Way*, one of the activities of the first week involves thinking about your "monsters" (people that have criticized your creativity in the past) and your supporters (people that have encouraged your creativity in the past) (Cameron, 1992). Reconnecting with the supporters of your past play can be one way to regain a support system that worked for you previously. In this activity, I immediately thought of my family, specifically my mom, my dad, and one of my grandmothers, my Meme. In visualizing this support system, it helped me momentarily quiet my monsters. In

addition, revisiting this experience through improved thinking lenses made me realize that these people are all big supporters of my successes, both creatively, and in my life in general. I have even reached out to my dad and found a way to incorporate him in my own creative play: by making music with him.

Another way to create a support system is to find a buddy and establish creative play check-ins with them on a weekly basis. This can include finding someone to help you gain insight into your creative play (Hirst, 1992). Sometimes it is easier when others are expecting you to follow-through with something, because they will hold you accountable. When we don't hold ourselves accountable, we sometimes make excuses for why we weren't successful. It is a lot easier to give up when no one knows that we are giving up but ourselves. If we doubt ourselves as to whether we can actually follow-through with pursuing creative play, we could potentially fail, ensuring the fulfillment of our own self-prophecy. We validate our reasons for not needing to even pursue creative play to begin with. A support system provides us with encouragement even when we are not yet at the point that we can fully support ourselves.

Brannen (2002) offers a different perspective on how to regain creative play as an adult. She first suggests that you look at a series of lists (either ones in her book or ones that you write yourself) to stimulate your thoughts on activities that you might enjoy as your play. Her method is to look at these lists, score them as to whether you would never do something in a million years, whether you might do it, or whether it is something you have done before and know that you love. She then suggests that you look through your scoring system at the “maybes” and reflect more on why you considered them a maybe. Think about whether these maybes could turn into an activity that you really would like to try, even if it is just once. Often just going through these lists and being aware of the feelings that you have while thinking about the activities are enough to prompt you to action. The more activities you pursue, the closer you will come to finding what your “heart play” is and how you can continue to pursue it.

Although I am still in the process of regaining a sense of my own creative play, I feel like the first step to bringing more play into my life was an awareness that I was not getting enough

play to begin with, followed closely by determining how to change this thinking. How can I balance creative play with my other responsibilities? In what other ways can I successfully incorporate creative play into my life without compromising other aspects of my life?

Sometimes having the desire to pursue a goal is not enough; it's important to cultivate "habits of mind" that allow the use of creative play in life, and learn to sustain that play as well. In cultivating a habit of mind, the inclination to pursue that habit is necessary in order for it to be successful. In addition, it is important to practice sensitivity in knowing when to incorporate creative play and the commitment to allow play to be part of our thinking dispositions (Costa, 2001). For example, if I start making music a part of my everyday life through continuous practice, because it is something I need to be happy and satisfied with my life, then at some point it will become a habit of mind, like being flexible in my thoughts or suspending judgments. It goes without saying, I think, that valuing the importance of play is a prerequisite to having it become a habit of mind, and having the capability to play in the first place is also important. I personally think that we all have this capability, but the degree to which we value this play determines whether we have the inclination, sensitivity, and commitment to develop this play to fit into our lives.

As mentioned, one step that I have taken already to incorporate creative play into my life is to become aware of my lack of creative play in the first place. I am also holding myself accountable to pursue this loss of creative play by telling everyone (peers, co-workers, friends, and family) that at this point in my life I am not feeling fulfilled in my creative play. I am doing this so that they will check-in with me and also in the hopes that I can find others with similar interests to my own. I find that I have focused too much on the negative emotions and the monsters in my life in the past, and it is getting in the way of my actions. In some respects, I have become paralyzed by my own self-sabotage. I have given too much credibility to people that have said negative things about my creativity (including myself), and not enough credibility to those that have praised me. Perhaps this relates to the Generation Y research that says that people in my age group have grown up in a world of positive tolerance, wherein children get

rewarded by “just showing up” (Tulgan, 2009). I think that maybe this makes me think that if everyone is getting praised, then the praise doesn't have as much merit than if only a few people were receiving praise.

How I Want to Play: My Plan

In addition to these ideas to start incorporating play into my own life, I would like to tell you more about the types of play I would like to incorporate. I would like to sing in public again; I sometimes feel that my best singing happens when no one is around to hear me. By allowing myself to play with performance again, I will feel more confident in my abilities, and validated by receiving praise for this play. I plan to do this as a part of my synthesis presentation, by performing with my dad as an extension of our recordings together. Another play I would like to pursue is to take dance lessons again; but not just any kind of dance lessons. I would like to specifically take tap dance lessons, which used to be my favorite type of dance when I was growing up (and perhaps the most intimidating for me later in life). Another form of play that I would like to pursue is creative writing. One life goal that I have for myself, that I have trouble sharing with others because of the commitment and implications that it carries with it, is that I would like to write a fiction novel. I would like to even just write a novel from start to finish without stopping to self-edit and tell myself that it isn't perfect, or giving up before its finished. My short-term goal in this play is to at least get the words out, to finish the novel, and to allow myself to consider the first draft as a true draft, that shouldn't by any means be perfect. I plan to begin keeping a creativity journal to jot down ideas, poems, and songs to start with the process of incorporating creative writing into my life again.

In the Critical Thinking course, we discussed the concept of “transfer,” and specifically, how we can transfer critical thinking skills from the classroom to our lives outside of the classroom. By transferring a concept, we are showing that what we have learned is valuable to us. I would like to brainstorm ways that I can transfer the concept of creative play into my work and my career as a communications professional, because I have not yet been able to transfer these concepts naturally. A small way suggested by Brannen (2002) is to smile more in the

workplace. She says that this act of smiling is really more for yourself than for the other person, because it will allow you to understand more about what you like and do not like about your work. I plan to incorporate some of the brainstorming techniques described in the book, Thinkertoys (Michalko, 2006) into my work to help me with this act of transfer. By using creative thinking techniques in the workplace, I will be able to transfer skills from the Critical and Creative Thinking program into my work setting.

In the next several sections of this paper, I will detail my active efforts to play more while simultaneously developing this project. In “Reflections of Play: Finding my Voice,” I will detail the continuation of a musical project that I started with my father two years ago. This project involves family music; my dad and I performing cover songs together that are meaningful to one or both of us. “Practicing my Passion” is the next section, and this passion that I speak of is one of my first loves, dance. This section features six weeks’ worth of written reflections as I go back to tap dancing lessons for the first time in 10 years. In “Wordplay,” I briefly discuss my return to creative writing, the baby steps that I start taking to get back into the habit of journaling. Finally, in “Workplay,” I explore methods to incorporate play into my work environment, including the beginnings of an action plan that was started this semester in another Critical and Creative Thinking course, Action Research for Educational, Professional, and Personal Change with Professor Peter Taylor. This part of my synthesis highlights the process of play, and emphasizes its importance in discovering a path towards a lifetime of play.

Reflections of Play: Finding my Voice

I would like to preface this section by revealing a recent personal experience that gave me a new reason to keep singing. My grandmother, or as I call her, my Meme, was recently diagnosed with brain cancer. She can no longer play the piano, which was a love of hers for over 70 years. She is too weak physically and mentally to play like she used to. My dad has been taking care of her along with his brothers and sisters, and he has recently begun bringing his guitar with him. Their time together now consists of the basics, like food and naps, as well as impromptu sing-a-longs, which I was fortunate enough to be a part of one weekend. I was nervous to sing in front of her again, because I didn't want to disappoint her (because she always tells me how wonderful my singing is); the last time she heard me sing was 10 years ago in the musical, *The Sound of Music*. I always think of that time in high school as when I was at my best vocally, because I was singing all the time in two honors choirs and with private voice lessons. Realizing that I don't know how many more opportunities I will have to sing for her in her life, I took my dad up on his offer to play guitar while I sang. Singing songs like "The Rainbow Connection," "What a Wonderful World," and ending with "Tomorrow" (from the musical, *Annie*), I eventually let go of my own insecurities and sang the best I could. When I finished, my Meme looked at me and told me that having music in her life made her feel like herself again. Since then, I have been fortunate to participate in even more sing-a-longs with her. My exploration into my own creative play is making me feel like myself again too.

My dad and I have decided to go a step further with our recordings from a previous class (*Creative Thinking*, fall 2008) and record more songs together. Our first four songs were based on two songs that were meaningful to us: *Unforgettable* by Nat "King" Cole and Natalie Cole, and "You've Got a Friend" by James Taylor. We then stimulated our musical intelligence by singing the songs again with different words and playing around with the songs using humor. Our next iteration of this project will be to each choose two songs that were meaningful in our lives, exclusive from one another, and then sing them with one another. We have chosen to work on the songs, "Detour Ahead" by Ella Fitzgerald and "In My Room" by the Beach Boys. In

“Detour Ahead,” I find myself thinking about how the lyrics have applied to my life; the obstacles that I have faced in relationships and the choices that I made, whether it was to overcome those obstacles, or to take the easy path and let go. My dad remembers listening to “In My Room” as a teenager, literally, in his room, because he felt as though his room was a sanctuary that he could escape from his brothers and sisters and go to for serenity and guitar-practicing. He speaks a lot about how he would take time out for himself to play guitar as a teenager, and literally lose all sense of that time; when he would have “flow” experiences with his guitar.

On our first official meeting to sing and play guitar together, it didn’t go as well as planned. It turns out that both songs are a lot more challenging than they initially seem. Another complication that we faced is the natural way that we might start interacting as father and daughter instead of as equals; if there is a power struggle, the father usually wins. I must admit that I let my frustration get the better of me, and I ended the rehearsal before we had planned, because I felt a mental block. I didn’t understand some of the notes in the songs, and wasn’t quite getting the relationship between the vocals and the guitar part in “Detour Ahead.” I asked him to record the guitar part for me and send it to me so that I could rehearse more. It’s hard for me to keep going when I know that I’m not understanding something; I know that I can’t be perfect, or what I would consider close to perfect, but it’s practically painful for me to keep going and making the same mistake repeatedly. I have high standards for myself that can sometimes be unrealistic, because I don’t want to make any mistakes (pitch-wise, tonally, singing the wrong words). It is all a learning process, and this was only our first try, so I am optimistic that we will get it at some point.

Within the next week, my dad recorded the guitar part for both of the songs and sent them to me in an email. For the next week, I was able to practice the songs on my own. This ended up making me feel a lot more comfortable with both songs. When we next met, we were able to get through “Detour Ahead” on the first try. We recorded it a few times for practice, and I also videotaped one of our recordings. In the last recording, we chose to stop, because although

it wasn't perfect, we were both satisfied with our rendition, and realized that it would never be perfect. It took a lot for me to admit that I didn't want to keep trying, because in reality, I was worried that it would never be perfect. My dad was hesitant to stop, but agreed that it was good the way that it was. This experience gave me a glimpse into having a parent that has perfectionist tendencies as well.

I found that while I wanted to stop singing completely when I felt that I was making too many mistakes, my dad took the opposite approach. His tendency to be a perfectionist pushed him to keep going until he got the song right. I am usually too impatient to keep practicing, which is why I usually quit doing an activity if I start to feel like it is not good enough for my own standards. My dad was also getting frustrated with the situation, but he seems to have learned with experience that the only way to get better at something is with more practice. I am willing to practice to improve, but I often have a hard time practicing with others, because I do not want them to see/hear me make mistakes. In this second meeting, I decided to let go and have fun with some of the mistakes that I was making in order to explore new ways to sing each of the songs. I ended up having more fun when I recognized and discarded my own impossible expectations.

With the second song, "In My Room," we decided that both of us would sing because there are a lot of harmonies in the song. We practiced for a while, but we weren't able to finalize the song in the second practice session, because the harmonies didn't sound confident enough, and because we had run out of time. After this session, we were due to go visit my Meme, where we proceeded to have an hour-long sing-a-long. My Meme revealed that her favorite song of all is "Danny Boy," so it would be nice if my dad and I could record that for her at some point. Our session ended, but not before we sang "Danny Boy" and our own rendition of "Detour Ahead" for her. We finished our second song within the next couple weeks.

During this process of reconnecting with making music with my dad, I have been trying to become more public with my singing. I posted a video of my dad and me performing on the internet as a first step. A second, and much bigger step, is that I volunteered to sing at an event at

my work called, "Talented U." This is a showcase for professional and classified staff that also have abilities in performing or visual arts. The event will take place on the same day as my synthesis presentation, and some of my co-workers have already said that they are looking forward to coming to support me. Although I have performed in front of people in the past, I had honestly thought that I was finished performing after high school and college, because I didn't know where to perform, and I didn't want to expose too much of my inner self. Through this activity with my dad, I am gaining confidence in taking risks, letting go of some of my perfectionist tendencies, and trying to overcome some of my creative blocks that have held me back for a long time. The two songs that we recorded during this time will be included with this synthesis project on a CD, and the Talented U performance will be available in DVD format.

Practicing My Passion

I recently visited a dance shoe store for the first time in a very long time. I was at the store to buy my first set of tap shoes in the past 10 years. As I waited my turn with the other dancers, I could already hear the negative self-doubts in my head, “You are the oldest dancer here! You are way too old to be taking dance classes.” It’s true that I was the oldest dancer there, and also the only dancer that did not need to be accompanied by an adult. It felt very uncomfortable, and it would have been very easy to walk out of the dance store to save my embarrassment. However, I didn’t walk out of the store, and instead I bought the nicest tap shoes I have ever had (and the only tap shoes that I have ever purchased for myself).

Before my first class at Boston Percussive Dance studio in Cambridge, MA, I began having mixed emotions about starting tap dance lessons again. What if I don’t remember how to do any of the steps? What if everyone is better than me? What if I don’t like tap dancing anymore? I tried not to let my fears get the best of me. I tried telling myself that I had to go because I had already invested in a nice pair of tap shoes. I would really regret it if I didn’t follow-through on this big step in my life. In the following pages, I will include reflections following six of my tap dance classes over the next 12 weeks, and a summary of my overall experience halfway through the process.

9/18/10: Tap Dance Reflection, Week 1

Objective	Reflective	Interpretive	Decisional
I have not taken a tap class in 10 years	I am more nervous than I thought I would be	I am overthinking the steps and sabotaging my performance	I am going to go into next week’s class with more of a positive attitude
I am the youngest person in the class	I am not as good as I had thought I would be	I am trying too hard to be perfect	I am going to laugh at myself more or ask questions when I can’t get a step
The instructor is nice to me, but also hard on me	I am having trouble getting the basics steps	I am not having as much fun as I thought I would	I am going to find a way to make this experience more enjoyable for myself

Objective	Reflective	Interpretive	Decisional
The people in the class are nice to me	I feel discouraged; I am not doing as well as I had hoped I would	I am missing the purpose of this class; I am paying this instructor to teach me to tap dance, I have decided to do this, and I am doing it for fun, not to compete with anyone else	I am going to remember that I am the one that initiated this experience, and I am the only one who can affect my outlook on this experience
The studio is hard to find at first	I am frustrated and I feel like giving up before I embarrass myself	I need to remind myself that this is a fun experience, even if it is challenging at first	I am doing this for a reason; I want to re-live a playful time in my life. I need to remember that playing isn't about who is the best at something, it is about who is enjoying themselves the most.
During the tap class, I see my face get red and I am holding back tears; after the class, when I get outside, I let them go	I want to be in the higher level class, and so I am trying too hard to get there faster	If I can become more comfortable, confident, and less self-critical, my performance will improve	
The basic steps are not the same combination of steps that I learned when I used to take lessons	I do not feel confident in my steps, and it shows: my tap sounds are not as loud as they could be	I do not need to be in the higher class yet; I am still getting used to tapping again, and I cannot expect to be perfect, or I am just setting myself up to fail	
The style of teaching is different from what I am used to: there is no music until the very end of class and the instructor singles us out individually to perform the step in front of the class	I do not yet feel comfortable in this environment, but all of the other students have taken lessons with this instructor before		
I am looking at the clock			
I signed up for a 12-week session before I even took the first class			

9/25/10: Tap Dancing Reflection, Week 2

This week I went into tap class determined to change my attitude. I didn't want to get too frustrated that I didn't have a good time or enjoy myself while I was learning the steps. I realized a few things during this week's class that helped me to not get quite as frustrated:

- In the fall, this class focuses a lot on technique. I didn't realize this at the time that I signed up, but knowing this now helped me realize why the instructor was focusing on perfecting out steps so much. In the spring, the instructor focuses more on routines.
- When I realize that the instructor is looking at me, I usually mess up. It seems inevitable!
- The majority of the students in the class with me are just as hard on themselves when they mess up a step.
- I found that if I smile more, ask questions, and interact more with the other students in a joking manner, then it helps me to leave the class in a better mood.

Although I do not know whether my tap dancing ability improved this week, I left class and did not break down into tears, which is better than my first week. I am accepting that I am a beginner again, and that as a beginner, I cannot just expect to be perfect every time I try a step. There was one step that I couldn't get right, called a "closed third." It seemed like everyone else in the class could do them with no problem, but I just couldn't do them as fast. I asked the instructor, "How can I do it faster?" and her response was, "Practice. And all of the other students in the class have practiced it a lot, so don't worry about not getting it yet."

It is important for me to focus on both what I think I did well, and what I need to practice more for next week. I think that I did well when we were learning the routine, but I need to practice my closed thirds more. I think that I did well with my attitude in class, but I think that I need to focus less on my performance when the instructor is watching me, and more on enjoying doing what I love to do regardless of the outcome, which I now realize will always result in degrees of success on some level. I am happy that I went to a second class and didn't give up on myself after the first class, because I am learning more about myself and how I can handle challenging situations in a positive way.

I am proud of myself for taking this step and pursuing dance again when I could have easily talked myself out of it. My biggest fear with tap dance class was realized last week: I took a class and wasn't as good as I had hoped I would be. Now that I have overcome that initial class, I am getting more benefits because I have dropped my unrealistic expectations for myself. I am excited by how this week's class went in comparison to last week's class, because now I see myself as incorporating dance class into the creative play in my life.

10/3/10: Tap Dancing Reflection, Week 3

I feel a little as though I am back to my starting point. This week's left me feeling embarrassed and frustrated. The old blurts in my head ("You're not getting it! You're doing it wrong!") came back, and it was hard for me to quiet them. The instructor made a substitution in one of the steps, and as a way to clarify the change, I raised my hand and asked if she was changing the step in one way. She said no, but whenever she demonstrated it to the class, I was not connecting with her teaching and could not figure out what she was changing. Assuming that I wasn't the only person in the class that did not understand, I again asked what it was being changed to, and she responded by acting annoyed and giving me the name of the step, which helped a lot more for me to understand what she was doing. At the time, I felt like an absolute moron, and was thankful that it was towards the end of class and I could rush out of there as fast as possible. Unfortunately, I have signed up for the 12 week session and can either forfeit the money that I spent on these classes and give up, or try to put up with it for the remainder of the semester. I am starting to realize that although I wanted to take tap dance lessons again, I am not having the fun experience that I had hoped to have, despite my best efforts. I am thinking that maybe I should try to find another class that is more fun for me, rather than a class that I leave crying two thirds of the time. I am going to continue going to this class in the hopes that I start to enjoy it more in the future, but after this session I will probably look elsewhere to continue taking tap classes. I am also planning on re-addressing methods to quiet my own negative blurts so that I can push past them and enjoy myself more in the future.

10/9/10: Tap Reflection, Week 4

Free-write: I have discovered that I am better at the soft shoe style of tap dancing rather than the staccato type of tap dancing; perhaps this is because of my previous training? I think that I feel more comfortable doing the soft shoe style, plus the instructor also played some jazz music for us to do the routine to, so that made me feel more comfortable as well. I feel like a large part of why I loved dance so much as a child had to do more with just the steps, but with the way that the steps were set to music as well. Because of this, it makes sense that to me, it is just more natural to dance with the music rather than make my own form of music with my tap shoes. The instructor mentioned that this coming weekend there will be an event called a Master Jam wherein there are master jazz musicians that play music while tap dancers improvise the steps to correspond with the music, much like a scat singer would sing to correspond with the music. The instructor made this comparison about the scat singer, and how that type of singer is different from another singer that stands in front of the band and sings almost separately (not sure I totally agree with that analogy, but okay). I am excited to find out that I do still have some natural ability, and for me, knowing that I can do something better and improve makes the play part more satisfying for me. Well, it also makes me play more to begin with. Now that I feel like I can actually handle some of the steps, I feel freer to play with the steps and have fun while I am dancing. This leads me to believe that my tap dance classes are starting to become more like play to me. To be honest though, I really was dreading going to class this week, after having a less than amazing time last week. I am glad that I went because I feel as though I was able to enjoy being in the class and the act of dancing more this week.

10/16/10: Tap Reflection, Week 5

This past week I was able to experience more of a sense of play and let go of some perfectionist tendencies. I allowed myself to make mistakes without getting upset about them, and in doing so, felt as though I made significantly less mistakes. Or maybe the mistakes were just less significant. The instructor actually went longer than the time for the class to end, perhaps because collectively as a class we were doing well, and also perhaps she was in a good

mood and wanted to continue. At the end of the class, I noticed that a lot of people in the class made comments about how good that night's class was, and how they felt like they had accomplished a lot.

There were three big differences in this week's class that made it work more for me: my attitude towards the class, the instructor's attitude towards the class, and my own re-conceptualized criteria for success. Rather than just learning drills, the instructor was drilling us in a fun way: she was teaching us new steps in addition to the already learned steps, and combining them in new and different ways. We also had a longer routine to learn, and had music accompaniment to go along with the routine. I think that dancing a routine together made us feel more like a class as a whole, rather than just a bunch of individuals, trying to fend for themselves. This assumption was confirmed when I was asked after class by another dancer whether I would be able to meet up with them on Tuesday nights to rent the studio and practice together. I had to pass them up for this semester, but it made me see the class more as a team and see the commitment and devotion that other people in the class have to tap dance.

I am looking forward to the next class, because I am slowly loosening up more and more. I feel like I know people in the class, and that makes me more confident in my steps. It's kind of like going back to an academic class for the first time and feeling nervous because you're not sure if you can still be a good student. It usually takes a few weeks to feel comfortable and to start bonding with your peers. I am looking forward to getting to a point where I can play even more, naturally.

10/22/10: Tap Dancing Reflection, Week 6

Objective	Reflective	Interpretive	Decisional
I feel more comfortable when I arrive at dance class	I feel more excited/challenged to learn new steps than I was in the past	I am becoming more confident in my dance steps, my performance, and my tap sounds, because I am feeling more comfortable in the environment	I am going to keep going to class for the next 6 weeks and look forward to it each week
I am always the first person in my class to arrive	I find myself subconsciously looking to the instructor for approval, when I should be focusing more on my own steps	I feel like the class is more of a team than a class; I feel this way because I am beginning to feel connected with the class	I am going to continue to encourage my classmates and be a team player
I am realizing that while I feel like I know the people in my class, I still do not know many of their names	Although I dread the drive through Cambridge, I am happy when I get to the studio	I am checking the clock less, because I am enjoying the moment. When I do check the clock, I'm wishing there was more time	I am going to focus more on my own feelings instead of worrying about whether or not I am winning over the instructor's approval
I try all the new steps that the instructor teaches us	I am starting to think of myself as a dancer again	I feel like I have reclaimed a part of myself that I had thought was lost	
I no longer feel like the new person in class	The instructor is treating us all like dancers, not adult beginner students; somehow there is a difference that's hard to explain	When I encourage the other students in class, I am doing this because I want them to feel like they are equals in the group and because I don't want to see them get frustrated or upset.	I am going to try to play even more in class whenever I have the opportunity
I get a small thrill just by lacing up my tap shoes	I make a conscious effort to encourage the other students in the class, because I don't want them to feel discouraged	I want them to enjoy their play without the feelings of disappointment. Perhaps this is a projection of what I am trying to do for myself.	
I can keep up with the class, and am starting to notice a change in the way that I dance	I found myself slightly nervous to practice with the other students, because I wanted to play and do some advanced steps, but I knew that the other students wouldn't know.		

Objective	Reflective	Interpretive	Decisional
The instructor tells us that she is impressed with our class tonight	I compromised by doing a couple steps that were advanced, and then switched to the routines we had been learning.		
We get to try our routine out with a blues song to help us keep time			
I leave the class happy and call my parents to tell them how class went			
When other students talk negative about their abilities, I tell them that they did better than they thought they did			
There is no class before us this week, so we get to have about 15 minutes to play around and practice our steps/routines without the instructor			

Overall, my tap dancing experience has been more varied than I thought it would be. Originally, I thought the hardest part would be to go to my first class; however, it really took me a few weeks to start enjoying the class. I thought that once I started dancing again, it would automatically turn into play, but that wasn't the case. The class and the transition to being a dancer again was challenging for me, both mentally and physically. I realized that not only is it not important to be perfect, but that isn't even my goal anymore. I had to tell myself that this was meant to be an enjoyable activity and that the attitude I brought to the class would affect my overall experience. By accepting that I can have fun and play without needing to be perfect, I was able to let my guard down and start to experience dance as a form of play again.

It is interesting to me to think of creative play as something that one has to work at in order to achieve; it's like cultivating any other aspect of our creativity. When I envisioned the

definition of play, I automatically thought that creative play would be something that I would enjoy doing because it came easy to me naturally. I didn't think about having to work at play. This experience in going back to a childhood creative play of mine, tap dancing, made me realize that sometimes we need to get over an initial transition period that may even be challenging, in order to feel the true rewards of play. I feel more proud of myself for taking a risk and going back to tap dance for the risk itself, than I would have felt if I had been perfect in my dance steps. This experience led me to believe that our creative play can be a process, and we can learn to enjoy the process just as much, or even more so than the product. The product itself is also dependent on this process. I also learned that it means more to stick with an activity that you find enjoyable, despite your internal self-doubt or setbacks in your learning, than to just do an activity because it is easy and safe.

Wordplay

I have a small journal that I bought when I visited Japan a few years ago that I am scared to write in. What if my words aren't meaningful and I waste the pages? In the past, I have always felt that my creative writing was best when it came from a dark place: depression, hurt, betrayal, or rejection. I don't know why I felt that this was my best work. Is it because in these times of negative emotions, I allow myself to turn my inner editor off and express myself? Are these writings the most meaningful because they are the most genuine and raw, free of expectations or judgments? Sometimes the negative emotions are too much that I don't want to put them into words. Either way, I would like to write more poetry and songs, but I need to make myself write on a more regular basis. I enjoy writing, but I don't want to write something that is inadequate to me and "ruin" my notebook. Over the next few weeks, I will start writing again, whether or not I myself think it is "quality" writing, without a filter, just to write.

I have begun to write in this blank journal, and decorated the cover of it so it is not quite so blank anymore. I wrote the beginning of a song, but it is not finished yet. It was hard for me to write anything, because I was facing a creative block of not wanting to put anything down for fear that it would not be as good as I wanted it to be. I broke through the block by telling myself that it didn't have to be the best thing that I ever wrote (in my own opinion of course), but that the main point was that I was writing something. The journal is no longer a blank journal, waiting for stories and ideas. I plan to keep the journal with me more often so that I can write down poems or songs as they come to my mind. Hopefully, I can begin making creative writing a part of my play in a casual, everyday format.

Although this part of my creative play is brief, it is still equally valuable. Writing involves risk-taking, because it is a very personal form of play. When you write, you are revealing some part of yourself from your mind to an external audience. It can seem daunting, because the words seem to be set in stone as soon as you write them. I plan to continue this journal, and keep pushing myself to write more and more without my own self-editor.

WorkPlay

Often times at work, I feel as though I am faced with barriers to my creative thinking and my creative play for a variety of reasons. I work in an administration office in a higher education setting, as the communications person for the office. A lot of the communications I write are internal, and there is a tone to it that needs to be professional and respectful. Most times, I am writing as a representative of my office, so I write in a way that conveys a message, but does not convey any of my personal feelings. This can be difficult at times, because I feel as though I cannot be creative in my writing because I am not writing as a representative of myself. The audience that I write to is varied, in terms of whether I am writing to the entire university, students, faculty, or staff. I feel boxed in with my writing, as the general consensus of my office is to be very traditional for most of the time, with exceptions for new programs or initiatives.

One of the other creative barriers that I feel is based on my age and how others expect me to think or write. At times, I am asked to be creative, and it is assumed that I easily be creative and brainstorm because I am the youngest person in the office. I have an easy time adapting to new technology, so I am often the person assigned to help others with technology. The drawback to people assuming that you will always have creative ideas and be able to pick new skills up easily is that there is an added pressure to this assumed role. When I am asked for a new, creative idea, I feel stumped, because I am being pressured to not only come up with a creative idea, but to come up with one that would also be realistic to implement.

Just as it is with my creative play, sometimes I don't take the praise I receive at work as real, even if it is justified, and instead give more value to any negative feedback. By changing (reprioritizing, etc.) the way that I accept both positive and negative feedback, I can actively pursue more play in the workplace. I am going to try to accept positive praise better (sometimes I am prone to saying "No problem" instead of "Thank you") and try to look further into negative feedback to find ways in which I can perceive it as constructive feedback, and not a personal attack on my work. I am usually too safe when it comes to my writing, because my writing is often from another person's perspective (usually my boss or my office's), and sometimes this

safety net carries over to all of my projects. However, there are some projects that I can afford to be more playful with, and this is something that I plan to work on.

Based on these creative blocks, I would like to explore ways in which I can introduce creative play and increased creative thinking into my work environment, both as an individual, and for the department. One way that I can re-frame my own thinking is by examining the concept of De Bono's (1985) Six Thinking Hats. Each hat is represented by a different color, and corresponds to a different type of thinking. By separating these forms of thinking, this allows the individual to focus and examine a situation from multiple perspectives. Particularly of interest to me would be the green hat, which represents creative and lateral thinking. In green hat thinking, it is acceptable to brainstorm ideas that may not be realistic or even logical; this type of thinking is more concerned with new ideas rather than "right" ideas. The concept of using the green hat also relies on the idea that others involved in the brainstorming are also wearing green hats, whether they are speaking or listening. This idea suggests that a safe space is needed for creative thinking to occur, one wherein the people in that space are not judging ideas before they are fully developed. Putting on this green hat is a signal to ourselves to think creatively, and to not judge our own ideas before they are fully developed either. The green hat can allow people to spend more time actively thinking creatively, which may or may not yield results, but can at least motivate a person to think more creatively in the future.

In my project for the course, Action Research for Educational, Professional, and Personal Change, I have begun reflection on how I could potentially incorporate play into my workplace. One of the ideas that I have is to take more creative control over a newsletter that I produce each semester. Since I am the person that manages the newsletter, it is still fairly new and may be an outlet for me to practice creativity and play. Specifically, I have talked to one of my bosses about adding a section in the newsletter that is not an article, but that introduces a creative thinking technique or some type of puzzle to the audience. My boss was receptive to the idea, so I then proposed it to a group of people that are a leadership group for the audience that receives this newsletter. They seemed neutral in their response, and since no one explicitly said that it was a

bad idea, I have decided that I am going to pursue it. I am hoping that by introducing play into my work setting, I will be able to increase my overall happiness and job satisfaction. I also plan on taking happiness and job satisfaction surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of adding play to my workplace. This will be an ongoing process, and I hope to find new ways to introduce play into my work on a consistent basis.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

A journey of creative play is never completed. That's one of the best things about learning to play again: that it is a lifelong commitment. I believe that I am ready to make this commitment to myself and to allow the happiness that I receive by playing spill over into my professional and personal life. I am ready to embrace my childhood creative play and also challenge it. Why have I spent time feeling nostalgic for a past that I thought could not be recreated, when there is still time to explore new ways to fulfill my creative play? In my journey, I have discovered why I don't play anymore. My biggest threat has not been that I am no longer capable of playing or being involved in creative play; my biggest threat was myself and my negative self-talk that rendered me "playless." I was not allowing myself to experience creative play as a way to feel that sense of happiness and accomplishment, because I was not fully letting go of my perfectionist tendencies. For some reason, I had also subconsciously determined that I didn't deserve to play because I had too many other commitments at work or in class that consumed my time. According to Brannen (2002), when it comes to finally breaking down our resistance to play, we will make many mistakes and have many false starts, but if we can push through, our lives will never be the same.

Creative play is personal because it touches the innermost part of our being. When we allow ourselves to play, we are allowing ourselves to be happy and be present in that moment. I believe that the role of creative play in our adult lives needs to increase its perceived value, and we all need to come together to make creative play an accepted part of society. There will always be time to get everything done: we'll meet deadlines at work, we'll finish our papers and

exams, we'll be productive members of society, and we'll be able to take the time for those people closest to us. But we need to realize that there will always be time for creative play, too. We need to give ourselves the permission to play.

Much like the title of Brannen's book (2002), a book that reached me at a critical point in my early research when I still felt quite lost, I have decided to give myself the "gift of play." My journey is still in progress, and I plan on continuing to really express my play and enrich my play. Part of what made a lasting impression with me in that first Critical and Creative Thinking course in the fall of 2008 was how I interpreted my final project. I used concepts in class (Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, Lazar, 1991) and applied them to a musical project with my father, in which he played guitar and we sang together. This was a project that I had wanted to do for so long, but couldn't find the time to do it until I made it a priority (and gave it a deadline). My commitment and involvement with this project gave me a glimpse of that heart play at a time when I wasn't ready to fully commit to it yet.

In the final paper for my Creative Thinking final project from the fall of 2008, I stated, "I am glad that this project forced my dad and myself to sit down and work on something together that would incorporate both of our creative minds, separately and together. I know that my dad is also thankful for this experience, and I am so happy that this class has inspired me to look beyond the classroom and apply it to my own personal fulfillment" (Blaquiere, 2008). Two years ago, when I was just beginning the Critical and Creative Thinking program, I vividly remember the emotions that I felt surrounding this project. It was a reawakening of my creativity, and one that was sorely needed. By singing with my dad in this synthesis project, I felt as though I was re-opening that project and that it really has potential to be an ongoing project. Although I will no longer have the deadlines of classroom assignments, I am still confident that my dad and I have a new project that we both enjoy working on, and will continue to play with. Perhaps the next installment of our music together will be my dad's favorite genre: the blues.

Through dancing, singing, and writing, I am not only exploring my childhood sense of creative play, but I am also reconnecting with a part of myself. Who was I before I learned how

to act in public as an adult? Who was I before I learned how to blend into the background and act like everyone else? The play that I thought should come naturally to me has been challenging at times, but I am realizing that it is not usually the play itself that is challenging, but my own attitudes and the people that I am engaging in creative play with. We are not all on the same wavelength in terms of embracing our creative play; and that's alright. As long as I find enjoyment in the activities that I pursue, then I am fulfilling my promise to play.

While I still feel like I have a long way to go towards continuing to overcome creative blocks, confront perfectionism, and add play to my everyday life, I have learned a lot in the course of the Critical and Creative Thinking program that has put me in a good position to succeed in achieving my goals. I have learned the importance of suspending judgment towards others, which has helped me learn how to develop a "safe space" with people that support me. I have reconnected with my sense of self by introducing practiced reflection into my life, including free-writing exercises as well. I have learned specific creative thinking tools, such as SCAMPER, off-the-wall ideas, why-why diagrams (see Appendix A, B, and C for examples), as well as critical thinking skills that will aid me in my future both personally and professionally. I have made meaningful connections with professors, students, and alumni of the program that have set me up to have lasting relationships long after the program ends.

As I finish the Critical and Creative Thinking program, I find myself questioning what's next. I plan to continue taking tap dancing lessons as a part of keeping dance in my life. I plan to continue to practice songs with my dad and to record, perform, or just to have fun with music. I plan to keep writing in my journal, regardless of how I feel at the time. I plan to keep looking for new ways to add play into my work. As I pursue these outlets for play, I also plan to keep my thinking in check: am I overanalyzing a situation and doubting myself too much to have fun doing something that I enjoy? What are my reasons for doing this, and how can I stop or reverse the negativity? Through this journey of play, I have specifically learned more about myself and my own goals for creating the life that I want to live. Now that I have taken the steps to make a change in my life, I do not plan to go back to a life without play. I have learned that most of the

time, when I am busy doubting myself, there are many other people in the same room, with the same self-doubts and fears. Knowing this gives me my own personal strength to push through the negative self-talk and confront my fears head on. I have learned the importance of being a part of a community of people that are all pursuing their own play. I have learned that I do not plan to lose my spirit of play no matter what factors may block my creativity at times. And most importantly, I have learned a life lesson from my Meme that may have gone unnoticed if I hadn't been focusing on the concept of play and reintroducing it into my adult life: that having play (singing, dancing, writing, and more) in my life has made me feel more like myself again.

Appendix A: SCAMPER Brainstorming technique (Michalko 1998):

Problem: I have some creative blocks that have not allowed me to play in the past.

S = Substitute?

- Make blocks into motivational tools
- Self-doubt with self-praise
- Fear with excitement to try something new
- Negative associations with blocks, instead see them as a chance to reflect

C = Combine?

- I could find other people who feel similar creative blocks and form a support group
- Creative blocks and building blocks... building blocks are a learning tool, so creative blocks could be too?
- Rewards for overcoming small creative blocks. When I do something that is difficult, I give myself a reward.

A = Adapt?

- I can adapt feelings of self-doubt into reflections of how I would feel after having accomplished a creative project
- I can adapt my free time to do something more meaningful than watching TV; i.e., use my free time to write more

M = Modify? Magnify? Minify?

- I can make creative blocks positive learning challenges
- I can change "I can't because..." sentences into "Why can't I..." sentences
- I can actively make creative play a bigger part of my life, thereby minimizing the time that I waste being too scared to try something new or scared to fail
- I can spend less time thinking about how others will view me and focus on my own creative play

P = Put to other uses?

- I can re-use feedback that I've received from past projects to help motivate me to start a new project
- I can re-use stories of others that have tried something new and both failed and succeeded in order to give myself a reality check

E = Eliminate or minify?

- I can get rid of the time I spend thinking about the possibility of failure. So what if I fail the first time? No one ever said that I can only try something once.
- I can get rid of negative thoughts about whether I am right or wrong. Sometimes a project is more about the process than the outcome.
- I can get rid of unhealthy friendships that are too competitive or make me feel less than what I am

R = Reverse? = Rearrange?

- I can be more courageous and try something first, before allowing thoughts of not being good enough come into my head
- I can succeed at something before trying it, because the act of allowing myself to try something new is a success
- I can reward myself for trying something new, rather than reward myself for succeeding at something
- I can focus more on the process of learning through creative play, rather than the creative product that I can produce

Appendix B: Crazy Idea Technique (Michalko, 1998):

Problem: I have a fear of failure or imperfection that inhibits my creativity.

Absurd ideas:

- Fail at everything on purpose.
- Quit my day job and become a full-time singer/dancer/actress/writer
- Make imperfections into the new creativity
- Try to go a day without doing anything remotely creative. Including not thinking of any new ideas.
- Never try anything new ever again.
- Laugh at bad criticism; only listen to the good critiques.
- Become a meteorologist so that no one can blame me if I predict the weather wrong (it happens all the time!)

Select one of the absurd ideas:

- Fail at everything on purpose

Extract the principle.

PRINCIPLE: I cannot be afraid of failure after I have already failed at something. The fear is of the unknown outcome of trying something new.

List features and aspects of the absurd idea.

- You can't put pressure on yourself to succeed when you are trying to fail
- By doing something that causes fear on purpose, this is like exposure therapy
- You can't worry about failing when that is your goal
- Success would be not failing as bad at one thing as you fail at something else
- Taking away this fear would increase your chances of trying something new, because there is no pressure to do it right

Imagineering. Extract the principle or one of the features and aspects and build it into a practical idea:

If you don't try something new, then you have no chance to fail or succeed at it. By eliminating a fear of failure, by not trying to succeed on your first try, you are opening yourself up to the possibility of trying something new more than once. This can allow you to find out if it's something you enjoy without the focus being on whether you can succeed or fail at it.

Appendix C: Why Why Diagram



Some Ideas

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EPILOGUE

After both my performance at the Talented U showcase, where my dad and I performed six songs, and my presentation of this synthesis project, where my dad and I performed “Detour Ahead,” I received a lot of comments from people about how they would like to incorporate play into their own lives. Some people even went as far as to say that hearing about my project in its early stages led them to take the action to pursue their own form of play again. It is important for me to stress that everyone’s concept of play is individual to them, and while I set out to specifically reconnect with my play from childhood in my journey, others may decide to reconnect with a type of play that they discovered later in life. A person may even play in a way that is completely different and new to them, to try out a new form of play for themselves. The reactions and feedback from both audiences made me realize that although this project represents my personal journey towards play, the journey to re-discovering play as an adult is a universal idea. These honest reactions allowed me to see concrete evidence of the potential for my own experience with reconnecting to play to influence the lives of others that may also have lost connection with their play.