

Minding our Zs and Qs

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"The game has luck, no doubt about it. It is up to the individual player to figure out how best to minimize the bad and maximize the good." --Brian Cappelletto, former World Scrabble Champion and American National Scrabble Champion

Our **first reading** today is a series of quotes from a book by former New York University professor of religion James Carse, entitled *Finite and Infinite Games*.¹

There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite.

A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.

Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries.

Surprise causes finite play to end; it is the reason for infinite play to continue.

To be prepared against surprise is to be trained. To be prepared for surprise is to be educated.

The finite play for life is serious; the infinite play of life is joyous.

The joyfulness of infinite play, its laughter, lies in learning to start something we cannot finish.

No one can play a game alone. One cannot be human by oneself.

Our social existence has...an inescapably fluid character.

...we are not the stones over which the stream of the world flows; we are the stream itself.

¹ This collection of quotes is found in Robert Fulghum, *Words I Wish I Wrote*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), pp. 125-26.

Book from which the quotes were gathered:
James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: Random House, 1986).

Change itself is the very basis of our continuity as persons.

Only that which can change can continue: this is the principle by which infinite players live.

Our **second reading** is a poem by Mary Oliver entitled "Broken, Unbroken"²

The lonely
stand in the dark corners
of their hearts.

I have seen them
in cities,
and in my own neighborhood,

nor could I touch them
with the magic
that they crave

to be unbroken.
Then, I myself,
lonely,

said hello to
good fortune.
Someone

came along
and lingered
and little by little

became everything
that makes the difference.
Oh, I wish such good luck
to everyone.
How beautiful it is
to be unbroken.

Sermon

I have always had a fascination with word games. From my first word

² Mary Oliver, *Evidence*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), pp. 69-70.

search in elementary school, when, with pencil in hand, we would race our classmates to circle words hidden within a grid of mixed-up letters, I was hooked. This is not to say that I've always been good at word games. No, just because I like to play with letters and language doesn't mean that my vocabulary is big enough to compete with the true wordophiles or philologists or out there. (I had to look up philologist, by the way). Crosswords often give me a headache, as I don't have the stamina to figure out all the quirky little words that enable one to figure out the bigger quirky words. Even Jumble, the mostly simple newspaper-comic-page puzzle in which the player has to unscramble a few words to figure out a bigger word or phrase, has frustrated me enough at times that I've peeked at the answers just to be done with it. Still, if I'm looking for something to pass the time or to divert my attention for a few minutes from something else I'm working on, I often click to an internet word game, like scramble or word twist. Fortunately my wife and I share this interest in word games and, being mostly equal in our word-game prowess, we have enjoyed some spirited competitions over the years. When our daughter was still young enough to take naps, Susan and I would often fill the precious time alone by playing our latest word-based competition. This kind of fun is part of our marriage dynamic. And I like it that way.

A few months back, we discovered an on-line version of Scrabble, the game in which players maintain racks of seven letter tiles, and then take turns forming and linking words made from those letters in crossword fashion on a grid, earning point totals based on the values of the individual letters, sometimes multiplied by bonus squares on the board. In Scrabble, a commonly used letter like an S or an A is worth one point, while a less frequently used letter like a J, an X, or a Q can be worth up to 10 points. A word that might earn a dozen points laid on one part of the board, could earn many times that if placed somewhere else so as to utilize a triple-word score square, or to double up or play off a previously played word. So a good deal of the strategy is not only being able to recognize and create words from one's unique collection of letters, but to know when to play them for the highest point reward.

I've played Scrabble for years and have always enjoyed it, but the online version was especially appealing to me, because, by the rules of the standard board game, it lets you cheat. In the online version, you have free access to a dictionary, there are no time limits, and you can try out words on the screen before you actually play them, without your opponent seeing what you are up to. As these features are

available to everyone, they serve, I think, to mostly level the playing field for most relatively compatible players.

The first few games Susan and I played, it seemed like online Scrabble might be our next word game obsession. But then Susan surprised me by declaring that she would no longer be playing with me. "It's just more frustrating than fun," she said. We had enjoyed about a half-dozen games when Susan said "no more." Well, I should say, that I had enjoyed these games, probably because I won more than my usual share. I tried to convince Susan to keep playing, asserting that I was just lucky, but she wasn't convinced. Maybe she could sense, at the time, that, despite what I told her, I didn't believe it was just luck that had carried me to victory. We've been together for more than 18 years, so Susan often knows what I really think whether I say it out loud or not, sometimes before I know. So I shouldn't be surprised that, despite what I told Susan, she knew that I thought I had earned those wins with my creative ways of employing the letters, of overlapping words, of finding just the right time to place a 10-point Z tile so that I could earn more points than any single turn should. I thought of the story that I had heard member Barb Royal tell about the way her parents used to play marathon sessions of Scrabble over many weeks that wouldn't end until her mom got several thousand points ahead of her dad. Barb has shared how her dad must have let her mom win, or didn't care enough about winning to strategize a way of coming out on top the same way her mom did. But, I had to confess, I wasn't her dad. I didn't want to play if I wasn't at least trying to win. And, I suppose, Susan feels the same way. Which is why, when I had a hot streak during our first few online Scrabble games, she had decided to throw in the towel.

Right around this time, I began playing with another friend, who was handily defeating me game after game after game (much to Susan's enjoyment!). Like Susan had, I, too, became frustrated, wondering why, when my tile rack was repeatedly filled with vowels and single point letters, my counterpart would repeatedly lay down words with a V or K or Q. In the game of Scrabble, when a player doesn't have the high-value letters, nothing much can be done to compete with those who do. As I struggled to comprehend how I never seemed to have the letters that my fellow player did, I began to rethink my unspoken certainty that my initial victories over Susan had been due to skill. Now, on the other side of the advantages of random luck, I, too, wanted to quit. Who, after all, wants to be repeatedly defeated? But I kept playing because I began to see that these Scrabble experiences were reminding me of something important.

My friend and I were mostly equal in our Scrabble abilities, as far as I could tell. Neither of us tended to play words that the other wouldn't. As I looked back over the games we had shared, I noted that, not surprisingly, the victor in our matches typically was the one who had played the greater number of the high-value letters, in particular the X, the Z and the Q. Whoever had been lucky enough to randomly receive at least two of these letters during a given match, would almost certainly come out on top. So when it came right down to it, victory in the game of on-line Scrabble between two mostly evenly-matched players has much more to do with random advantages that the player did not choose or earn than with effort or skill. Simply put, either you have the letters to win or you don't.

When I made this realization, it was comforting to me. In fact, it was easier to kind of roll with the losses. But the more I played, the more I saw the game of Scrabble as a metaphor for the ways our lives as sisters and brothers in the human community are tilted unfairly towards those with the blessings of privilege, for how in the game of life, success is often out of reach if one doesn't have access to the same high-value opportunities. I acknowledged that when the stakes are higher than a board game, for example, when one's ability to do nearly anything is impacted by her cultural or socioeconomic status, the "game" isn't so easy to roll with. I saw a connection between what my games of Scrabble were teaching me and the wisdom I had gained many years ago during a week-long training I had experienced in preparation to becoming a diversity education facilitator for the Anti-Defamation League.

We were into our third day of the training and the nearly twenty participants and I had traded many stories from our lives in both small and large group settings. We self identified under various descriptors, such as Latina, second-generation Mexican, African-American, Austrian, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Unitarian Universalist. The participants included college professors, graduate students, social workers, conflict mediators, religious professionals, and an attorney. Though our backgrounds were different, we shared much, including the obvious desire to do the work of diversity training. This day, the facilitators had my fellow participants and I line up shoulder to shoulder across the width of the long room where the workshop was taking place. Imagine the room as a tennis court, with the participants as the net. We were instructed to hold hands and then move according to a list of directions which included:
--If you hold a college degree, take a step forward.

- If both your parents completed college, take a step forward.
- If while shopping, you have ever been followed by store personnel, take a step back.
- If the holidays which are important to your culture or religion are not celebrated by the general population, take a step back.
- If your parents took you to cultural events as a child, take a step forward.
- If you had consistent access to nutritious meals while growing up, take a step forward.
- If you have ever been viewed as a minority in any way, take a step back.

We were instructed to take baby steps, so as not to separate ourselves too quickly, and there were upwards of thirty statements directing us before we stood in our final positions. An added level of complexity was brought to this exercise by the instruction that we were to remain silent, to keep holding hands as long as possible, and to look around the room to see where everyone else was after each direction. No doubt you could accurately predict the arrangement of the room by the conclusion of the final statement. After all, we don't have to look too deeply into statistics to understand the power differential in this country is still tilted significantly toward straight, white males. I found myself at the front of the room, literally just a few inches from the wall facing me. Scattered behind me were the people with whom I had shared the past three days. I had heard their stories. We had laughed together. We had cried together. And now these new friends of mine, these talented, caring individuals were several feet apart, some so far back that they could no longer hold the hands of the people who at the beginning were at their side. As I looked around, I could see some of my friends were crying. Some looked angry. And there I was at the front, with my arms yanked painfully back in a desperate attempt to maintain contact with my neighbors. The concept of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic privilege had never been so clearly on display for me before. I'd seen it described on paper, but now I was feeling it, living it, embodying it. But there's more. We were told to let go of our hands and, on the count of three, to run as fast as we could to the front of the room. Those left farthest behind were encouraged to pull themselves "up by their bootstraps" implying that they would be rewarded with success if they just tried hard enough. I easily won the race. But I cannot express to you how hollow the victory felt. What had I won? What had I won?

Through the lens of my new-found Scrabble wisdom, this diversity training exercise was a similar reminder that, simply put, either you

have the letters to win, or you don't.

After the exercise, we discussed what had occurred. Those who had started at the front of the room talked about how they considered waiting for the others, yet none of us did. I spoke of how I felt a responsibility for my companions but not a responsibility that would force me to give up the things that had enabled me to have such a short distance to the front. I contended that the most effective way of bringing justice to the race should not be for me to give up the benefits of a loving, economically secure family or a good education, but to do what I could to bring everyone up to where I was. But, let's face it: my ability to rationalize my own privilege was a component of that privilege. The real learning for me was to come from listening to the comments of those who had started at the back of the room. Some, still teary eyed, declared that this exercise was a painful reminder of what they have experienced throughout their lives. Others had been angered and determined to reach the front no matter who they had to trip on the way. And some declared that they hadn't seen the point of trying to run. Why bother? They simply gave up. They simply gave up.

Before this exercise, my position of privilege had made it unnecessary for me to fully consider the challenges those behind me had been facing. I had been trapped by the luxury of remaining ignorant, of enjoying the spoils of my advantages so much that I didn't have to understand that others did not have the same opportunities. But now, I had been given another chance to be alive to the pain of others, to recognize that, though I cannot be responsible for all the problems of the world, none of us can, I do have a responsibility to pay attention to those around me, to not take for granted the gifts I have been given, not only my privileges of status (earned and unearned), but also my ability to be open to the circumstances of my neighbors and to do what I can to see that we all have as equal access as possible to what we might call, in the words of Scrabble, the high-value letters. I have a responsibility to be ever-mindful of who has the Zs and Qs.

I've had two very powerful experiences of increasing mindfulness this month. One came when I traveled to San Antonio as part of an AMOS delegation of clergy and civic leaders to tour an award-winning workforce development program called Project Quest. For a day, we listened to those on both the planning side of this project and those who have been served by it. And, across the board, the stories were hopeful and inspiring. Hundreds of citizens of San Antonio have transformed their lives through this project, going from poverty and

dead-end minimum wage jobs to solid middle-class careers. They have seen the possibilities of their living expand from the bleak to the bountiful, and everyone involved is better for it. I'm proud to say that AMOS is committed to bringing a similar program to Des Moines and I intend to be with it every step of the way. Let me know if you'd like to join me. There is room for everyone in this important, life-giving work.

The second experience came just this past Wednesday, when I gathered with fellow citizens from all over this state, including more than 15 members of our church, to participate in a Lobby Day event at the Capitol to protect marriage equality for same-sex couples. Now you know where I have long stood on this issue, that I think civil marriage is a civil right, but I must say, when I gather with people to stand up for the rights of the same-sex couples who are married or who will one day seek to be married, I still get choked up as I have to reflect on the unearned privileges I receive from being in a heterosexual marriage. No one questions my right to love my wife. No religious organizations are lobbying the statehouse to take my marriage away from me. When Kate and Trish Varnum, one of the couples from the case that brought marriage equality to Iowa, stood up and spoke about how deeply gratifying it was to finally have the same rights that most heterosexual couples take for granted, I couldn't help but tear up. But at least I wasn't crying from afar. I was crying in the middle of the ongoing struggle. And my presence there was not only an attempt to level the playing field, but to use the power of my privilege toward the benefit of the common good. I accept this as my responsibility, as something my place of privilege affords me the power to do. The more I stand on the side of marriage equality, the more I stand on the side of love, the more my privilege, previously taken for granted, becomes stronger and more meaningful in the best ways, because I am seeking to share it with others. I've come to understand that my individual victories and privileges are hollow if they are not accessible to all. I've come to see that just as Scrabble is not as fun when one person wins every game, life is less meaningful if its beauty and bounty are not shared among all our sisters and brothers, if we do not seek the beloved community where no one wins unless everyone can.

Civil rights lawyer and US Senate candidate Roxanne Conlin closed out her speech to us at Wednesday's lobby day with these words, adapted from words originally spoken by Jill Ruckelshaus at the Iowa Women's Political Caucus nearly 40 years ago. They sum up not only what is required of those of us who can see the privileges we have, but the

rewards that await us when we work together to share them. She said:

"We are in for a very long haul.
I am asking for everything you have to give.
We will never give up.

Your will lose your youth, your sleep, your patience, your sense of humor and sometimes the understanding and support of people you love.

In return, I have nothing to offer you but your pride in being part of the struggle,

And all the dreams you have ever had,

For your children,

And your grandchildren,

And the future;

And the certain knowledge, that at the end of your days,

You will be able to look back and say for all of your life,

You gave all that you had,

For justice."

The rules of the game can be changed from the finite to the infinite. And good luck can be something not just received and hoarded, but pursued, and grown, and shared. This is the work of a justice-seeking people. And it is good, life-enriching work. For how beautiful it can be in this broken world, for each of us, sisters and brothers in one human family to finally be unbroken. How beautiful it can be.