



Play Practice

By Anne Trench

This is a Several months ago, when I asked Krista Harris if I could interview her about InterPlay for this newsletter, I had no idea that she was planning her SanghaPlay workshop for March 12th. I just wanted to know more about InterPlay. I had participated in one of her earlier workshops. Afterward, I'd felt a freer, more joyful me emerging. When my four-month-old granddaughter found her feet, I surprised myself by rolling on the floor in "happy baby pose" with her to celebrate. Then I found myself hiding under the dining room table with a five-year-old. A week later, I was singing aloud on a chairlift (alone!). How to account for these bursts of silliness and joy? Perhaps it was due in part to Krista's workshop.

It's true – Krista wants the sangha to "come out and play." She also wants us to understand that play is just another facet of dharma and a way to get in touch with our creativity, our joy, our sorrow, and our bodies. Krista is among the first disciples of InterPlay, a unique practice for creative and spiritual growth. Twenty-two years ago, she brought InterPlay to Seattle, where the InterPlay community is now humming. In turn, InterPlay brought Krista to insight meditation and to our sangha at SIMS. It's a wonderful story and one that reveals how deeply play can go.

In 2000, an incredibly vital InterPlay friend of Krista's was diagnosed with incurable cancer. Krista pledged to create a space with fellow InterPlayers where Peggy "could dance and sing, and tell big stories about her journey with cancer." Seeking to better understand all that was happening, Krista stumbled on a course entitled "A Year to Live," given by Rodney Smith.

During that hard year and in the years that followed, Krista discovered many similarities and complementary connections between InterPlay and meditation. The basic, well-known forms of InterPlay helped Peggy embrace death, just as the basic, known practices of meditation – being still, focusing on the breath, being with what is – were helping Krista more fully embrace life. For over ten years, Krista has been working to deepen the embodied knowledge of stillness in the InterPlay community, and she wants to bring more embodied knowledge of "play" to the SIMS sangha.

Watch Krista. She moves with the grace and ease of a trained, professional dancer; she is very comfortable in her body. For the rest of us, that ease of movement may not be so available. And, please, don't ask us to be silly, to dance, or – even worse – to sing! Krista hates "that these human birthrights are so often taken away from us." In our culture, the robbery begins as we leave childhood for adolescence and is usually complete by adulthood. We become, she says, "like old-fashioned wine barrels, constrained by tight metal bands, unwilling to be our undefended selves."

InterPlay has many similarities to Buddhism, and in SIMS workshops Krista invites participants to creatively explore dharmic themes. InterPlaying in this dharmic way can help us break free of those tight metal rings and be more spacious, embodied, and interconnected. If we break free with other sangha

members, we can become a stronger, more vital, and more joyful community. (InterPlay is often referred to as a recovery program for overly serious people!)

InterPlay founders, Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter, discovered years ago that people come home to their bodies when they play, when they improvise with the things *their* body can do, rather than trying to copy a teacher who asks you to “move like I do” or “be like I am.” InterPlay’s improvisational forms are safe, easy and fun. They incrementally invite people to be more spontaneous and playful. The dharmic piece? Mindfulness helps us see and feel the benefits of inhabiting more of our aliveness. With that comes more ease and joy and gratitude! We begin the process of “younging,” of letting ourselves be lighter and sillier, and we give others the permission to do the same.

“Think of highly, highly embodied spiritual people like the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu,” Krista points out, “They’re laughing all the time. They’re grounded, yet highly evolved. Think of James Baraz and *Awakening Joy*.”

Krista knows that we, as a sangha, are up to this. Anyone can “play,” even someone with a bum hip or knee, even, as she knows intimately, someone who is dying. All we need is the willingness to take a little risk. Just as when we began meditating, we said to ourselves “I can sit for ten minutes,” we can say, “I can play for ten minutes.” Especially if we have a trained expert to gently encourage us with small, safe, incremental steps.

Why should we play? “With each different way of expressing ourselves, we get another piece of truth about ourselves,” Krista says. She is “a first foundation of mindfulness girl” and believes that play is a powerful embodiment tool. In play, we explore territory a bit outside of our comfort zone while also finding places of refuge within ourselves.

What’s more, InterPlay creates community. As people connect more fully with themselves and with others, they experience interbeing. Bonds form and deepen when we let go of our inhibitions and laugh and play together. “If we allow ourselves to be a little more playful, some delightful discoveries might be made – about sangha,” Krista says a bit mysteriously.

Krista’s experience with her friend Peggy shows just how deep, how dharmic, play can be – how “play” can intensify connection and be a tool to deal with the most profound experiences. Peggy danced and played through her final time. Krista described Peggy’s last group dance in a contribution to an InterPlay guidebook:

Peggy was very weak and needed long periods of rest. We knew she was too fragile to dance, but she insisted on getting up and dancing nonetheless. As had happened many times before, Peggy came to life in a much bigger way than her body could actually support. She spoke one last time of her profound love and gratitude for all of us. She confessed that she still could not make sense or meaning out of her dying, but that her spirit and her capacity to love had expanded exponentially. With considerable difficulty, Peggy lowered herself to the floor and curled into a tiny ball, symbolizing the place she had been before her diagnosis of cancer. Peggy gently released the tight ball of her body and, with

miraculous ease, slowly rose to her feet. Standing tall, her arms and chest opened as she gratefully claimed the expansion of her spirit. (From “*Dancing and Dying*” by Krista Harris and Peggy King in *What the Body Wants* by Cynthia Winton-Henry with Phil Porter.)

Are you up for something both so light and so deep? Krista will lead another SanghaPlay workshop on Saturday, March 12th, from 1-4 p.m. at the SIMS Center. Will you come out and play?