

Recognizing the Bigger Game

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In our everyday life, we commonly find ourselves immersed in our little games (i.e., things to accomplish & accumulate). If we pause and take a few steps back, however, many of us will notice that these little games are embedded in bigger games and those bigger games are, in turn, embedded in even bigger games. Unfortunately most of us, including myself, walk through life completely unaware of these bigger games. This article is an invitation to explore what those bigger games might be and how cultivating awareness of them may be of great benefit to both ourselves and the world around us.

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In our everyday life, we commonly find ourselves immersed in games. By games, I mean projects, things we want to accomplish, experience, and accumulate. Many of us even keep a checklist of them. In a sense, they are all games. When we reach the desired outcome of the game, we are satisfied and when we don't, we are frustrated. In fact, life is a never-ending series of these little games. It took me a long time but I am finally figuring out that how we perceive these games has a great impact on the quality of our lives. My dear reader, I thank you for reading this far. If you are willing, I invite you to stay with me for a little while longer to explore our own perceptions about these games.

Please allow me to begin by sharing an amazing story I once read in a book called, *The Power of Intention* by Wayne Dyer (2005). It was about a young boy called Shaya. He was a child with a learning disability. His father was making a speech at his school's fundraiser. In his speech, his father was asking, "If God made everything perfectly, where was Shaya's perfection?" Compared to other children, Shaya was a boy who couldn't understand, remember, or solve problems well. After a lengthy pause, the father said that he believes that God brings a child like this into the world, because he seeks perfection in the way people react to this child.

He then told this beautiful story. He was walking home with Shaya one day and they saw a bunch of boys playing baseball in the park. Shaya said, "Do you think they will let me play?" The father knew the boys would not want him but also knew that Shaya wanted a sense of belonging. So he asked the boys if his son could play. There was a bit of a pause as the boys looked at each other to decide what

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to say. Then one boy said, "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

Shaya had a big smile. He received a glove and went in to play in the outfield. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team was now down by three runs. It was two outs and the bases were loaded and it was Shaya's turn to bat. Shaya's dad was not sure if the boys would let Shaya up to bat at such an important juncture of the game. Shaya did not even know how to hold the bat properly. Surprisingly, the boys gave him the bat and the pitcher moved in close and lobbed the ball slowly so that Shaya would have a chance to hit the ball. Shaya missed the ball. So one of Shaya's teammates came up to hold the bat with him. The pitcher moved even closer and lobbed the ball to them. With the help of his teammate, Shaya scraped the ball and it slowly rolled to the pitcher's feet.

Even though the pitcher could have easily picked the ball up and thrown it to first base, he took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far beyond the reach of the first baseman. Everyone started saying, "Shaya, run to first. Run to first!" By the time Shaya turned first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag Shaya out. But the right-fielder knew what was happening. He threw the ball high and far over the second baseman's head. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing team's shortstop ran to him, turned him in the direction of third base and said, "Run to third!" As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him saying, "Shaya run home!" Shaya was super excited as he stepped on home plate. Then all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a *Grand Slam* and won the game for his team. "That day," said the father softly with tears now rolling down his face, "those 18 boys reached their level of God's perfection."

These boys recognized that there was a bigger game than the baseball game they were playing. As my life progresses, I have come to realize more and more that all of the games we play in life are embedded in bigger games. When we see those bigger games, we begin to understand more and more that all of our opponents in the smaller games are actually our teammates in the bigger game.

Maturation through Loss

Though we live most of our lives unaware of the bigger games, I have noticed that as time goes by, many of us are given opportunities to see the bigger games more and more. For example, many of us try to live our lives according to what we believe is right and good, and understandably, we play this game as if it were the only thing that matters. But when we lose that game, our world crumbles. And as our world crumbles, we are given the opportunity to open up into a game that is bigger than that. In his book, *Sometimes Brilliant*, Larry Brilliant (2016) describes witnessing this kind of opening.

Larry Brilliant found himself as part of a team consisting of members of the World Health Organization (WHO) who were trying to eradicate smallpox in India and Bangladesh. They were vaccinating everyone in a radius of a certain number of miles of the people who had smallpox. They had a few villages left to vaccinate. There was one tribe in the remaining villages that believed that smallpox was a gift of God and resisted receiving the vaccination. The medical team of the WHO wanted to respect the beliefs of these people but if they did not vaccinate the people in this village, smallpox would spread again to other parts of the world when they encounter travelers or when the villagers themselves travelled to other places. This was a difficult predicament.

Eventually, they decided to forcefully vaccinate the leader of this village and his family. They thought that if the leader is vaccinated, the other people in the village will follow. They planned a midnight raid and broke into the house of the leader. The leader and his family resisted by kicking, punching, and biting the doctors and nurses. Eventually, the doctors and nurses held the leader down and vaccinated him. They also forcefully vaccinated his wife and children. The other villagers heard the noise and came to see what was happening.

After the leader and his family members were vaccinated, there was a long silence. Then the village leader went to his back yard and harvested their biggest cucumber and kindly offered it to the doctor leading the raid. Larry did not understand what was going on so he asked the other medical staff

members who understood their language. They told him that the village leader said, "We believe that smallpox is a gift of God and so our duty was to fight to keep it. You doctors believe that smallpox is an enemy to God and so your duty was to get rid of it. We fought our battle and we were outnumbered. We lost the battle. It is over. Now we find ourselves with all of you visitors in our house. Now it is our duty to serve and honor you as our guests because this is now our duty to God. We do not have much food but please allow us to honor you with the last good cucumber we have in our garden."

After a long silence, one of the doctors replied, "You are a good man living according to God's will. I am also living according to God's will. We are all doing our best to live according to God's will. We believe God's will is to relieve each other of suffering. Everything we have is a creation of God. If God has created a vaccine for smallpox, isn't it also God's will to vaccinate us and to save us from the suffering that comes with this disease? Please allow us to live according to God's will by vaccinating and relieving your people from this suffering." The leader consented and the villagers slowly lined up to receive the vaccination.

In this story, we see a wonderful story of playing the game as hard as we can, and win or lose, we know that, in the bigger game, we are all on the same team. And through the process of seeing more and more games at the bigger levels, more of the universe becomes perceived as *us* as opposed to *them*.

Survival and Soul

Sometimes we believe that the game we are playing is the biggest game of all. For example, many of us play the game of survival, maintaining health, finding security and safety quite seriously, and understandably so. If we reflect on much of the modern folklore of Western culture such as a bestseller novels and Hollywood movies, we realize that many of them are based on the assumption that physical survival is the biggest game of them all. But is physical survival really the biggest game? Could there possibly be a bigger game than that? Andrew Holecek (2013), a scholar and practitioner trained in the Buddhist tradition, says that investing solely in our current earthly life is like spending lots of time and energy decorating our hotel room knowing that we will be leaving in just a few days. In fact, if we take a global perspective, this view of seeing our existence beyond our current incarnation is quite common. The following is an experience shared by Ram Dass (2004), a wonderful spiritual teacher, who was raised in the United States and travelled to India.

In his earlier years while he was in India, Ram Dass visited Varanasi (a.k.a. Benares). Varanasi is a holy city where many individuals of the Hindu religion go to sanctify themselves by bathing in the Ganges rivers. The Ganges river in Varanasi is also the most sacred place to die. This is where *Shiva*, the supreme divine being, whispers something into our ears right before our moment of death so that we can graduate from kindergarten and have a chance to move on to first grade. During Ram Dass' first visit to Varanasi, he was so frightened and shocked to see so many people in the streets struggling with their health and dying. They were dragging their sick bodies, leaving trails of blood, going to the banks of the Ganges river so that they can die in the most sacred place. Most of them had a little bag of coins tied to their waist to pay for the wood to help burn their dead bodies. Ram Dass felt so badly for them. He could not handle seeing that much suffering. So he went back to his hotel room and literally hid himself under the covers.

After learning more about spirituality in India, Ram Dass went back to Varanasi. He saw the sick and dying people again. The first time he went to Varanasi, it was so emotional for him that he did not have the courage to look at these people in the eyes. But when he looked into the dying people's eyes this time, he saw that they were looking at him, a well-dressed, healthy, wealthy, educated gentleman from the West, with pity. They saw Ram Dass as a poor soul with no clue. He was a typical Westerner living a comfortable life not knowing what the purpose of this earthly life was. He was just a poor soul doing everything he can to stay in kindergarten for as long as possible. For the Hindu people, this life is just a tiny passage in the entire journey. It is an opportunity to burn off some karma that we have accumulated over many lifetimes. It was an opportunity to learn a few things in kindergarten to progress through the process of awakening that takes thousands of lifetimes.

At this point in his life, Ram Dass understood that when our physical bodies die in this earthly incarnation, we might have a chance to go into first grade to learn some higher wisdom to burn off a little more karma. He understood that this goes on for many rounds until eventually, when all of the karma has been burned off, we become one with God.

Whether you have the same belief system as these people in India or not, the fact that we cannot see the bigger game does not necessarily mean that there isn't one. There are, in fact, many spiritual teachings that consider our souls to continue on before and after our physical life. In fact, from these perspectives, souls are playing a much bigger game than the game of physical survival on the earthly plane. Even without exposure to any spiritual teachings, many of us have an intuitive understanding of this. To illustrate this point, I invite you to consider the following account from Stephen Levine. In his book, *Who Dies*, Stephen Levine (1982) recounted an experience he had counseling a mother who was losing her two and a half year old son to leukemia.

This little boy, called Tony, was lying in bed with his eyes wide open, completely present to the suffering that came with his condition and the chemotherapy he was receiving. His acceptance of his suffering and his impending death was extraordinary. This acceptance was somehow transmitted to his mother, which caused her considerable confusion. She spoke to Stephen Levine about how the most precious thing in her life was clearly parting ways with her, and somehow in her heart there was an incredible acceptance about it. She was afraid that there was something wrong with feeling that way. Her husband, a tough minded military man, kept insisting that this boy was not going to die. He found it very difficult to see his son so close to death and looking so peaceful about it. Tony's mother, in contrast, felt like she understood, not intellectually, but deep in her heart. She felt like this experience was meant to be and it was bringing both of them closer to each other as well as closer to the divine spirit.

Stephen Levine sat with this mother's words for a while and eventually said that perhaps she can fantasize for a moment that there are these two unborn beings, two souls, floating between births. And one of these beings goes to the other and says that there is still so much to learn and still so much healing to be done. And that soul says something like, "Perhaps we can help each other. You will become a thirty-one year old woman who gives birth to me, a precious and adorable child. And after sharing two years of earthly life together, the doctors will discover some serious illness that forces me to leave my body. And the two of us are forced to share this loss that breaks our hearts wide open. And through this loss, we will learn to open our hearts a little more than before. This openness will help us heal from much of the suffering that has accumulated inside of us over many previous lifetimes." And the other soul responds by saying that although this will be hard, it seems like great thing to do for the bigger game that we are playing.

Tony's mother said that somewhere deep inside, she could feel the truth of this kind of storyline. Though her body was shaking with tears, a deep part of her heart felt that this was exactly how it was supposed to unfold. After Tony left his body, his mother grieved like any mother would. But somewhere inside, she knew that her work with Tony was complete and it was alright for him to leave. Tony's father grieved a lot more with anger, guilt, and confusion. Then a few days later, at Tony's funeral, he had an unexpected heart opening experience. His eyes opened up with more clarity and said to his wife that he now understands how she feels. That somewhere inside, he knows that this is alright. And that he knows that Tony is alright.

Like in this story, what seems to be tragic to most of us earthly beings may actually be a blessing at the level of the soul. A loss for the ego, our earthly self, may sometimes lead to growth from the perspective of the soul. In fact, at this point in my life, I have come to understand that every experience is both a blessing and a curse. They only seem like only a blessing or only a curse when our attention has narrowed so much that we are unable to see what this experience may mean in the bigger picture.

Blessing and Curse

Many of us are familiar with the old Taoist folktale of the wise farmer. There are many variations of this tale but if you are not familiar with it, this is one version of it. One day an old farmer

was working in the field with his horse. Suddenly his horse ran away and was nowhere to be found. The neighbors from the village heard what had happened and offering their condolences. They said, "We are so sorry about what happened. Now your only horse is gone. How unfortunate you are!" The old farmer replied, "Maybe, maybe not."

A few days later the horse returned with another young wild horse which followed the original horse back to the farm. The neighbors heard about what had happened and came to congratulate the old farmer on his good luck. "We are so happy for you! How fortunate you are!" Again, the old farmer calmly replied, "Maybe, maybe not."

On the next day the old farmer's only son attempted to tame the new wild horse, but the farmer's son was thrown off the horse and broke his leg. The neighbors from the village heard what had happened and offered their condolences. They said, "We are so sorry about what happened. Now your son cannot help you with your farm work. How unfortunate you are!" The old farmer replied, "Maybe, maybe not."

A week later, a war broke out. All of the young men in the villages were drafted into the Imperial army. However, the farmer's son was deemed unfit to serve due to his broken leg. The war went on for a while and many of the men in the Imperial army were killed. The neighbors came by to the old farmer and said, "We received notice that our sons sacrificed their lives in the war. We have no sons to help us with our work anymore. You still have your son. What very good fortune you have!" The old farmer replied, "Maybe, maybe not."

As we can see from this tale, we never know what meaning our experiences hold in the bigger game. In the same way, if we see the game from the level of the soul, even the heartbreaking losses of the earthly games we play are meaningful, relevant, and contribute to the overall experience of our existence.

Games of the Soul

If you are willing, I invite you to explore our experiences from the perspective of the soul a little more. Let us go back to the idea of souls deciding to take birth in certain incarnations here. Most of us, including myself, do not remember what we decided to go into when we were souls before taking birth on the earthly plane. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that it did not happen. In spiritual traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, the incarnation and reincarnation of souls is not only considered to be a reasonable assumption but an obvious reality (Dass, 2004; Evans-Wentz, 1960; Yogananda, 1946). From these perspectives, the reason why we take birth in the earthly realm is to burn off our karma that has been accumulated over many incarnations. However, during this earthly life process, we often create more karma for ourselves and each other as well. And thus, we live in an ongoing cycle of samsara, the creation and burning off of karma. Until our earthly karma is burned off, we continue the cycle of reincarnating into earthly life. However, burning off our earthly karma is not the end of the story. These games that the soul plays are also embedded in much bigger games. Various spiritual traditions offer guidelines for what happens to the soul after burning off all of our earthly karma. For example, in Buddhism, it is said that our souls enter the *pure land* after burning off all of our earthly karma (Evans-Wentz, 1960; Holecek, 2013; Sogyal, 1993). Although there is no physical suffering in this realm, the *pure land* is not a realm of complete enlightenment. It is, however, considered to be a beautiful realm that exists in between earthly life and complete enlightenment. In some Buddhist traditions, souls in the *pure land* receive teachings directly from the Buddha, who offers guidance on the path toward enlightenment (Inagaki, 2003; Woodhead, 2016). Furthermore, in Hinduism, there are many levels in the *astral universe* that we travel through after burning off all of our earthly karma. Similar to the *pure land* in Buddhism, the *astral universe* exists in between the realm of earthly life and complete enlightenment. It is a realm of the vibratory life energy hidden behind the veil of the gross material universe (Yogananda, 1946)².

² This concept of the "in between realm" exists in other spiritual traditions as well. For example, there is an "in between realm" called the *Barzakh* in Islam. In the Lurianic Kabbalah in Judaism, there is an "in between realm" referred to as the *World of Yetzirah*.

In order to have a glimpse at these bigger games of the soul, I invite you to consider this story told by Krishna Das. Krishna Das, the world famous kirtan (Hindu chanting) singer once shared a story about a conversation he witnessed between his Guru, an enlightened being often referred to as Maharaj-ji, and one of his devotees (Krishna Das Music, 2021). The devotee was distressed about all of the problems of the world. He said, "We live in such horrific times, I wish we had a king like Janaka again." In Hindu mythology, which is also considered to be Indian history, Janaka was one of those rare earthly kings who was also known to be an enlightened being. The devotee then went on to say, "If we had a king like that, we might be saved. Maharaj-ji, will we have a king like Janaka soon?" Maharaj-ji, who is considered to be a completely enlightened being voluntarily visiting the earthly world (Dass, 2004; Mukerjee, 1996; Pande, 2011), answered, "Don't worry. There is a king that is much greater than Janaka taking care of us." From the perspective of the soul, all the beauty and the horrors of this world are built into the game. They are just like the comedic and tragic moments in movies. They are built into the storyline to create the beauty of the entire film. It is all part of the path for our awakening process. Having the awareness that the drama we find ourselves in is part of the beauty of the bigger storyline may help us become better surfers; surfers who can ride the waves of the ups and downs of life with a little more spaciousness in our hearts.

Games beyond the Soul

If you are willing to go a few steps further with me, we can entertain the possibility that the games played by the soul are also embedded in much bigger games as well. However, once we get to this level, I am afraid the games might be far beyond the grasp of our mortal human minds. If you have come this far though, I might as well invite you to explore those much bigger games with me, even though I myself do not have a clear understanding of them. If you are willing, I would be happy to share my musings with you. As meager as they may be, I have picked up some clues here and there.

In order to make these games somewhat more understandable to mortal human minds, some spiritual masters throughout history have created some visual imagery and metaphors. For example, in the Upanishads, the late Vedic Sanskrit texts of religious teachings which form the foundations of Hinduism, Indra is a king of the gods who not only takes care of many other gods, but also the souls of us mortal beings (Müller, 1900). But later, it is revealed that there are many Indras and that there is a god that presides over gods like Indra. This god is called Brahma, the creator god. Every time Brahma opens his eyes, a universe with an Indra is born. Every time he closes his eyes, the universe ends. This repeats itself over and over every time Brahma opens and closes his eyes. But even though Brahma is the one who creates universes and takes care of gods like Indra, he is not in charge of the biggest game. Brahma sits on a lotus, the symbol of divine energy and divine grace. This lotus grows from the navel of Vishnu, who is a sleeping god. The whole experience of this bigger universe, including Brahma, Indra, and souls in the mortal world, is merely a dream that Vishnu is having (Müller, 1900). In the greater scheme of things, this is how small we mortals are. And consequently, from this larger perspective, most of the games we are consciously playing are infinitesimally small. Vishnu might find it very challenging to even find a microscope powerful enough to see any of the games we are playing at all. And for all we know, Vishnu may be merely a character in a much bigger game that is being played...

Being a Good Sport

Does that mean that we should stop playing our small games? After all, it would not make much of a difference in the bigger picture anyways. Like many of you, I have considered this too. However, as many wise teachers have taught me (e.g., Brach, 2013; Dass, 2004), I have learned that the answer is *no*. It is like the story of the washed up starfish on the beach. If you don't know what I am referring to, the story goes like this. One day, after a big storm, a mother and her daughter were walking along the beach and they saw a bunch of starfish washed up on the sand. There were literally thousands of them all drying up in the sun. The daughter began picking them up one by one and throwing them back into the ocean. The mother began to help but eventually, she sighed and said, "Don't bother, there are so many of them."

It's hopeless. It won't make a difference." The daughter threw another one back in the ocean and said, "It made a difference to this one." Small games also have meaningful effects. Small, but meaningful effects to small mortal beings like us. Even if it only makes a difference to *this one*, the *this one* is, without a doubt, worth loving and cherishing. You might be thinking, "What if there is no *this one*? What if the game is just for me and it makes no difference to anyone else?" Please remember that you are also *this one* too. You are, without a doubt, absolutely worth loving and cherishing. ☺

In summary, even though small games are small, they are certainly still meaningful. It is like the boys playing a recreational baseball game. We know that win or lose, the world is not going to change in any dramatic way. But we still try our best to play well. How else could we play? If we stop trying, there is no point in playing. So we give it all we have. But not to the extent that we try so hard that we get boastful and arrogant if we are winning and angry and depressed if we are losing. We give it everything we have with the awareness that win or lose, the bigger game of life continues without skipping a beat. We know that this baseball game is embedded in much bigger and more important games. For example, I might know that I am the left fielder in this baseball game but I also remember that I am a fellow human being, a brother or sister to all other humans, in the bigger game.

And furthermore, even though we are aware of the bigger games, we know that satisfaction comes from enjoying those moments as we challenge ourselves to play our best in our smaller games. This is what we call being a *good sport*. And when the game is over, we move on to the next game, the next challenge that is presented to us. If we think about our experiences in this way, life is a succession of these little games. So my dear friend... if we are going to participate in life, we might as well try our best, enjoy the process, and be a *good sport* with each and every game we find ourselves involved in.

Benefits of Recognizing Bigger Games

To sum up, recognizing the bigger game has many benefits. The more we become aware of the bigger games, the more we can play our everyday "small" games with a lighter step. We still try our best, but we can still maintain a sense of humor about it all. We play with playfulness. The games become a dance in the spaciousness of existence. Every game is like moving to the rhythm of a divine song created by the Beloved (i.e., the uni-verse).

In addition, awareness of the bigger games also allows us to surf through the ups and downs of life a little more gracefully. Win or lose, we know that the universe goes on without skipping a beat. Win or lose, we know that we will be just as loveable and respectable as before. And if we have an opponent in the game, we know that, win or lose, they will be just as loveable and respectable as they were before.

And if that were not enough, there is an additional benefit to becoming aware of the bigger games. Little by little, more of what used to be *them* starts feeling more like *us*. We become more and more conscious of our larger *brotherhood/sisterhood*. Seeing the bigger games allow us to see that none of us are perfect and everyone is struggling hard in their own way. We begin to see that regardless of what it looks like from the outside, we are all trying our best to find our way home. Yes, home, a place where we feel like we can be free of suffering, free of judgments, free of the next thing we have to do... You know... Home, a place we can just relax and be ourselves...

I don't know about you, but these seem like darn good reasons to begin recognizing the bigger games. So whenever you notice that you are taking a game so seriously that it is getting to your head, I invite you to step back and see that it is just a little game in the bigger picture. That way, we try our best, and regardless of the outcome, we know that the Beloved will still have space for us in his/her cosmic classroom/playground. Because after all, that classroom/playground is spacious enough for everyone to play and learn in. No exceptions... Everyone...

As a way to conclude, I invite you to enjoy the following poem called, *Don't Worry, I Promise*. It is something I wrote a few years ago as I was preparing for one of my meditation classes. Eventually, it ended up in one of my books (Sato, 2019). And now, right here as well...

Do you think you can feel, think, desire,
or do anything that is beyond the will of the Beloved?

This universe is the school and playground
provided by the Beloved.

I have a vague memory
that right before I materialized,
the Beloved pointed to the universe
and said,

"You can play with anything you want here.

Don't worry.
All of the joys, sorrows, and horrors you get here are part
of the curriculum.

Don't worry.
At times, you might feel lost.

But as you get closer and closer to your graduation,
your mind will gradually become
less cluttered.

And you will start seeing me clearer
and clearer,
and for longer
periods of time.

Don't worry.
We will share a big hug
at your graduation ceremony...

I promise."

Whatever you do, wherever you go, I hope you enjoy your curriculum... Thank you so much for playing the game of reading this article. I think you might be finished with this one. Nice game my beautiful friend... Next! ☺

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