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## *A Blessing on Our Homes*

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### PLAY

#### **Scripture**

*Jesus said: 'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her children'.*

Matthew 11: 16-19

#### **Opening Prayer**

We give thanks for the gift that is home,  
We bless the one who gave us life that we might experience love  
We bless the ones with whom we live and share that love.  
We bless this day and watch for the blessings it holds in wait.  
We bless those we know and love now in their own homes.  
May we always be truly grateful and ever-loving good Lord. Amen.

As with the Study, not so many homes can dedicate a room as a playroom. This is a good thing really because it means that everywhere else becomes available for play. Play is far too important to be confined to one place or restricted from any. Anyhow, it's pointless trying to tidy playthings away. Toy Story tells us a great truth when it reminds us that toys have minds of their own, they are the tellers and makers of stories. The heroines and heroes of fantastic adventures. They also play a crucial part in rescuing us from fear, sadness, loneliness, powerlessness. So, we put our toys away at our peril. And sadly, this is precisely what we do.

I was looking for the reference to the great monster Leviathan being God's toy, God's plaything. You know, the plastic duck turning into a menacing foe, surfacing to terrify the toy soldiers in the plastic boat. Or toys, not even

intended for the bath somehow find their way into the bathroom and fall “accidentally” beneath the bubbles to emerge as combatants in a mighty conflict in which shampoo bottles are employed as laser jets. And if the devastation exceeds the walls of the bath creating a soggy mess on the bathroom floor all the better...

Anyhow, I found what I was looking for in Psalm 104:

“You stretch out the heavens like a tent.  
On the waters you establish your dwelling.  
You make the clouds your chariot;  
You ride on the wings of the wind.  
You make the winds your messengers,  
And flame and fire your servants.

You set the earth on its foundation,  
Immovable from age to age.  
You wrapped it with the depths like a cloak;  
The waters stood higher than the mountains etc...

*Then...*

Vast and wide is the span of the sea,  
With its teeming things past counting,  
Living things great and small.  
The ships moving there,  
And Leviathan you made to play with”  
(Psalm 104: 3-7, 25-26)

What a brilliant bath-time is that!

For a moment let’s remember that the psalmist was praising the God who is both creator and champion of justice. But rather than turning to the language of science, law, or history they reach for the language of the imagination. Language and images honed as a child at play. If you don’t believe me then read it again and remember things like dressing up boxes and all those other things, including ‘official’ toys and the improvised ones we make ourselves and which carry all the more significance for that.

During my search for the above reference to Leviathan its other appearances in the Bible also emerged. This is not the place to pursue these as well. However,

I would encourage you to do the exercise for yourselves. Take these two examples and see if you can read them through the lens of play: Psalm 74 in which Leviathan is mentioned in verse 14. Then Isaiah 27: 1.

Then there is, for me at least, the intriguing possibility of rereading the whole of the Book of Job in a totally new way. Early on, as he laments the misfortune that has befallen him Job curses the day he was born. How tragic is that; to look back on life with an attitude that can no longer remember any of its blessings. Yet we all suffer this kind of amnesia to some degree. We can all too easily fall into the trap of setting aside the gifts, skills and flashes of insight we received in childhood, most especially those unlocked by joy of play. It is as if we are saying with Job that none of that counts anymore. It's as if childhood and play have no abiding relevance in later life other than in our memories. The thought of re-engaging with that playfulness that defies our woes and challenges our fears by playing our way into a better future; doesn't suggest itself. Or, worse still we see the possibility but reject it in a fit of adult pique as Job does when he rages: "Let those curse it who curse the day, who are prepared to rouse Leviathan. (Job 3:8)

Unsurprisingly, God reminds Job of this when, having allowed all of Job's adult, rational, devout and philosophical comforters to have their say, to no effect. (Job 40 - 42: 6) Again, read it for yourselves as the language of play. Not play as mere amusement; but play and the language of imagination as being a more effective medium in dealing with even the deepest mysteries of suffering.

Supertramp, lament the enforced abandonment of childhood's particular skill set in *The Logical Song*:

When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful  
A miracle, oh it was beautiful, magical  
And all the birds in the trees, well they'd be singing so happily  
Oh joyfully, playfully watching me

But then they sent me away to teach me how to be sensible  
Logical, oh responsible, practical  
And they showed me a world where I could be so dependable  
Oh clinical, oh intellectual, cynical

There are times when all the world's asleep  
The questions run too deep  
For such a simple man  
Won't you please, please tell me what we've learned

I know it sounds absurd  
Please tell me who I am...

Songwriters: Richard Davies / Roger Hodgson  
The Logical Song lyrics © Universal Music Group

That's a good question to ponder deeply and at great length. Who am I when I allow a whole range of skills, experiences, and memories to be side lined as if inferior or less necessary to others? Let's commit ourselves to recovering our playfulness, delighting in movement, colour, music, dance, scissors, paint, cardboard, mud... the list goes on. We could all come up with our own list, but one Brazilian grandad did a great job:

"You know, Ana Carolina, I'm building a house for my grandchildren: you, Mariana, Camila, and others who may be coming. In that house I'm placing all my things for children, all my toys. They are the only things I find worth keeping. There you will find spinning-tops, marbles, kites, kaleidoscopes, puzzles, dolls, marionettes, a world of useless things that have the power to make dreams, story books, poetry books, song books, picture books, little gardens, fountains, plants, bonsais, paintings, posters, CD's. This is my house, my legacy: a house of toys for you. Now that you have arrived, even before seeing your face I look at my toys and imagine you playing with them. This makes me happy. And who knows, even your parents and other grown-ups turned children, may join us."<sup>1</sup>

### **Hymn Verse**

Did Jesus Play?  
We'd have to say  
It's very likely so.  
For ev'ry child that's born you see;  
Deserves to set imagination free  
To run, to jump, to skip and hide  
Give birth to all the joy inside.  
(I searched for a hymn mentioning play but in vain.  
So, here's a verse as Ernie Wise would say: "wot I wrote")

### **Blessing Prayer**

We bless our home for allowing us to reimagine its purpose

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<sup>1</sup> *Transparencies of Eternity*, Rubem Alves, Convivium Press 2010, Miami, Florida, USA. Pages103-4.

and potential, again and again.  
We bless the thoughts that cross our minds in dreams and imaginings.  
We bless the moments when care is cast aside  
Responding to the body's need to sway and dance.  
We bless those who makes us laugh, smile and cry with joy and affection.  
We bless the family jokes, the stories and rituals that bond us together.  
We invoke God's Spirit to dwell in this place,  
Disturbing our complacencies,  
Releasing our gifts,  
Impelling our creative impulses  
And deepening our appreciation of all that is beautiful, true and good.  
Amen.

#### ARTWORK NOTES

Figure 1. *Behemoth and Leviathan* – William Blake

God is pointing at the two beasts, Behemoth and Leviathan, as he addresses Job about the extent and power of His creation. Behemoth, the land monster, and Leviathan, a monster of the deep oceans.

Figure 2. *Woman Drawing beside Her Children* – (1950) Pablo Picasso

Picasso may have been one of the most successful and prolific European artists of the C20th. The way he treated his lovers and family was less admirable; chauvinistic indeed. This painting shows the mother of two of his children. Françoise Gilot received no help in the home although she aspired to be an artist herself. The painting shows her minding the children while still drawing. Sadly, it was only after a series of affairs and eventual separation that she managed to carve out a successful artistic career for herself. In this respect she is perhaps a better illustration of the points being considered in this reflection than her erstwhile Behemoth of a lover.

Figure 3. *Next* – Michael J Excell (1991)

Disturbance of domestic bliss is not the preserve of adults alone. Sibling rivalry can reach boiling point in disputes over all kinds of things; and play is no exception. We can only imagine the motivation for the girl wielding the scissors over the puppet strings, bust most of us have been there one time or another. This image is a necessary counterweight to the idealised picture in the preceding reflection on the importance of play. Play does not relieve us of our less kindly traits, well not straight away.

Figure 4. *Sunshine and Diversion* (1976) William Scott (Private Collection)

William Scott slipped somewhat under the radar among C20th British painters and artists. Yet he produced a wide range of work that canny and discerning collectors purchased at more reasonable rates than his more well-known artists. This picture makes into this collection because it has a ship and what I like to think of as a puppet. This is where personal nostalgia creeps in; as I remember having a toy boat that I was very fond of as well as a puppet show complete with a stage akin to those used for Punch and Judy shows. Here again we encounter how art can assist us in treating of the darker side of life without terrifying the life out of its audience. Can there be a more brutal exhibition than a Punch and Judy Show?

Figure 5. *Two Young Artists* – J R Everdon 1960-62

Note how the title remains unambiguous. Not two aspiring or would be artists. Not even two children painting. No this is a painting of *Two Young Artists*. And rightly so. There is an underlying if not explicit insistence here that there is a creative dimension to every human life. Sometimes this can be snuffed out, discouraged or abandoned. The contention of this reflection is that this dimension of human life cannot be eradicated altogether, but it can remain dormant without ever being roused from its slumbers, which is such a great pity.

Figure 6. *I Giocatore di Carte* (The Card Game) – 1894-5 Paul Cezanne

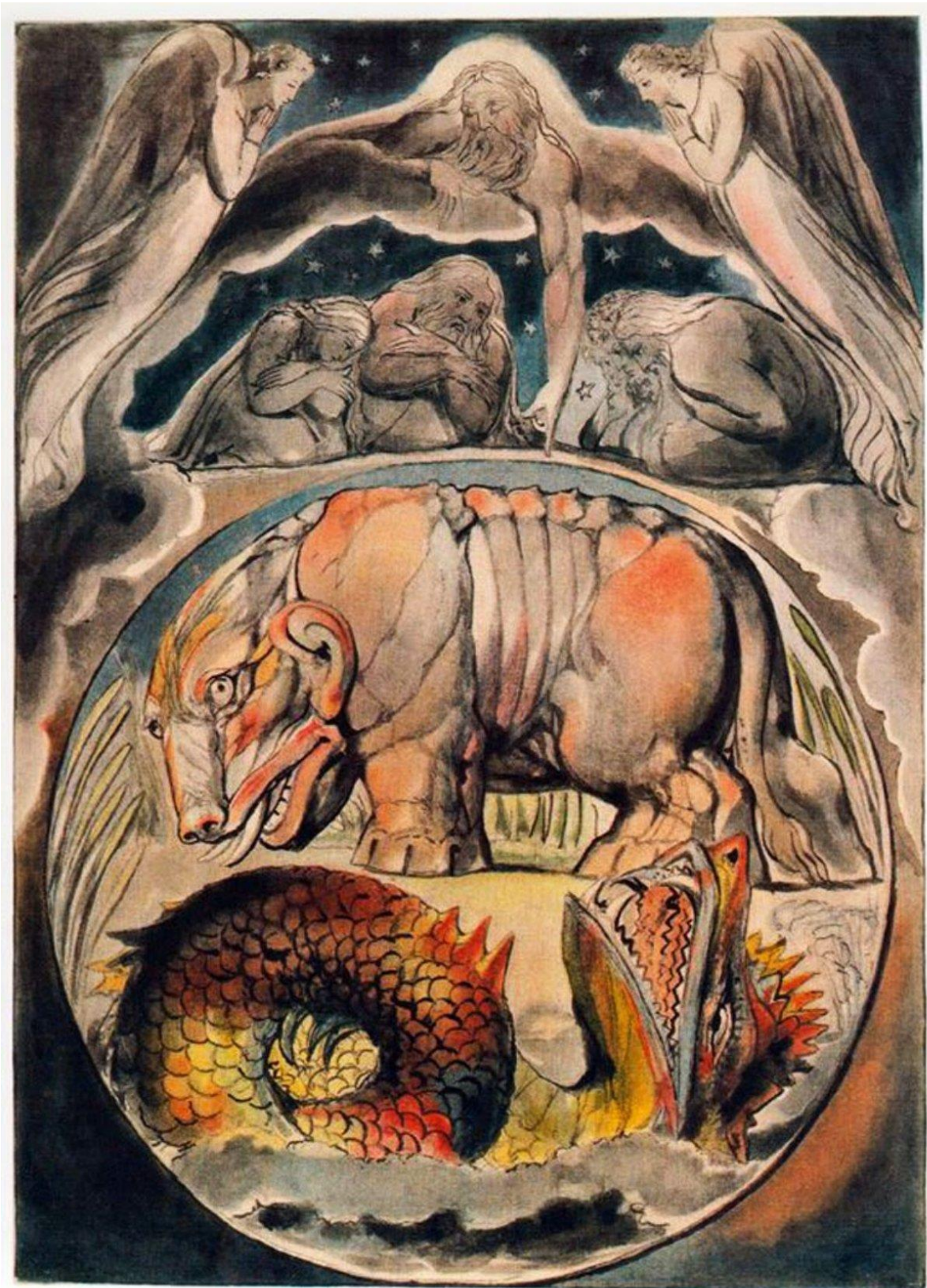
Adult pastimes do exist; and they provide hours of quiet enjoyment and socialising well into our years. The question I would want to pose; and I don't presume to have a definite answer to this is. Do such pastimes really qualify as play? Or is play something that breaks rules rather than following them? Imagination, creativity and spontaneity cannot and ought not to follow rules too slavishly which is why art in all its manifestations changes over time. That which is enduring deserves our respect and we continue to take delight in it. But those currently engaged in the arts are entitled, even duty bound to break with conventions and assist us in imagining our way beyond the dilemmas of the present times in a way only they can do.

## CRAFT KIDS

Now it seems to me that children are the experts in this subject so I can only make a suggestion or two. So, how about taking a good look at the toys you have. Remember the pleasure they have given you and say thank you. See if you can arrange them in an interesting display and then take a selfie with them for your keepsake box.

Then ask the toys if they can help you think about the strange things happening at the moment; like not going to school, not meeting up with friends or elderly relatives. See what ideas the toys help you come up with and perhaps get them to act it out around the house. Or if you are good at writing stories you could write one about how your toys would deal with the present situation. What kind of mood would each toy have? Would they work together or fall out with each other? I don't know. Only the toys can answer that one.

Figure 1. Behemoth and Leviathan – William Blake



(C) ArtsDot.com - William Blake



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