

Taken from *Created to Play* by Brianna Lambert

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1

Rediscovering Play

THERE ARE JOYS FASHIONED WITHIN YOU. They sit quietly while you run errands and check off to-do lists, but occasionally they catch the spark that pulls them surging to the surface. The instigator differs for each of us. For some it might be the scent of a plank of Bolivian walnut, for others the distant call of the wood thrush, or the unboxing of a new puzzle. We might feel our joy surge with the possibility of a new novel, the feel of a goat's muzzle, or the grid of an empty sudoku table. Anne of Green Gables found delight in a perfectly crafted name. "When I hit on a name that suits exactly it gives me a thrill. Do things ever give you a thrill?"¹ she asked.

Yes, they do. I feel that thrill when I clip on my thirty-pound backpack and head out for another day on the trail. I feel it atop the pavement that pushes against my feet for one more mile in my run. It stirs my spirit while turning another single-crochet stitch or crafting a poem. That same feeling turns my mouth into a beaming grin as I sit in the audience of a musical or catch my ducks dipping their beaks into the water for a drink.

These thrills don't originate solely because of the trees, the yarn, or the ducks, but they spring from deeper desires that find satisfaction within each of my hobbies. My crocheting and writing awaken my desire to create objects of beauty—just as my Father delights to create. The love of the running course satisfies a longing to work and move my body. Mountain trails beckon me because my heart aches to feel small and behold a greater beauty.

Your hobbies accomplish the same. They ignite within you deep joys that satisfy the purposes your Father forged within you. Unfortunately, we often don't get the opportunity to understand this because we're too busy feeling guilty about our play. We listen to the whispers in the back of our mind that tell us we're only being lazy and unproductive. Sound familiar? In order to adequately appreciate the way you and I were created to play, we must first throw off some common misconceptions.

But I Don't Want to Be Lazy

Many of us worry that taking part in our hobbies means succumbing to idleness. Nobody wants to be lazy. The book of Proverbs reminds us often of the dangers of the sluggard (Proverbs 10:4; 13:4; 18:9). Other verses warn against excessive sleep, encourage us to look to the diligent ant, and remind us to work heartily unto the Lord (Proverbs 20:13; 6:6; Colossians 3:23). These admonitions hang over our head as we take a break with a good book on the couch or spend an evening under the stars. Aren't we being lazy?

But these warnings in Scripture don't negate all rest and pleasure. God elevated both in the command of sabbath, the care of Elijah in the wilderness, or in Jesus taking the time to draw away from his ministry in order to sleep, pray, and enjoy food and

celebration (Mark 6:30-32; John 2:1-11). Laziness must encompass more than enjoying rest and play.

Instead of the absence of toil, medieval scholars defined idleness as a refusal of our created purpose.² Imagine a golden retriever sprawled out on the living room floor. When a ball goes flying past, he slowly lifts his head only to place it back down. A rabbit scampering in the yard receives only a glance while he continues toward his food bowl. Not even the bang of the delivery man at the door disturbs his slumber. We'd call this dog lazy not because he sleeps or eats—for even the most active dogs do both—but because he refuses to fetch, hunt, and protect. His sleep has prohibited him from enacting the very purposes for which he was born and bred. In short, he's refusing to act like a dog. Likewise, laziness for you and me means a refusal to walk in line with our created purpose. To combat idleness we don't necessarily need more effort but, as Pieper writes, “a cheerful affirmation of [our] own being.”³

We'll find the purpose of our being within the pages of the Scriptures. In them we discover we were made to image God, worship him, reflect his character, proclaim his glory, create beauty, cultivate his land, and multiply in the earth. God fashioned us to receive his gifts, acknowledge our dependence, and accomplish the good works he prepared for us (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15; Psalm 96:1-4; 121:1-2; Ephesians 2:10; Revelation 15:3-4). These are only a few of the ways we fulfill our role as God's children. With Pieper's definition, any activity that fulfills our created purpose can't be written off as idleness, even if it might be something as enjoyable as your favorite hobby.

This frees us from the guilt that looms over us as we partake in our hobbies. Of course, we can still fall prey to leaning heavily on

one purpose over another. Just as we can overemphasize our vocational role by never putting down our work phone, we can likewise overcommit within our avocation by never putting down a novel. Opportunity for neglect always abounds, yet this doesn't mean we need to brandish every activity that results in joy as the seed of laziness. The question we must ask instead is whether our hobbies enable us to fulfill the purposes for which we were made.

But I Don't Want to Be Unproductive

Close by our fear of laziness within hobbies lies our fear of their inefficiency. Goals and to-do lists fill our day and create a framework of life based on problems and solutions.⁴ Consequently, our hobbies feel unnecessary. We wonder what we accomplished by spending an afternoon with a fishing pole and an empty net. The metal lawn ornament we spent the weekend welding feels needless when we could have bought the ten-dollar replica at the farm store.

In an effort to legitimize our inefficient hobbies, we attempt to dress them as solutions: My paper crafting can earn extra money. Running will take off some pounds. These puzzles will keep my mind sharp. We couch our leisure in utility by making it the answer to a host of problems—our boredom, failing minds, loneliness, health, and the list goes on. While hobbies can offer many of these benefits, we don't have to shove them into the problem-and-solution dichotomy, for our God doesn't operate that way.

When God created the world, he encountered no problem to solve. Acts tells us that our sovereign God isn't served by human hands, and he's never had need of his people (Acts 17:25). We call this attribute his aseity. It means that before the trees sprang up

from the ground, before the otters splashed in the water, and before Adam breathed through his nostrils, God was perfectly content. He didn't need a friend, a creative outlet, or more worship. Our world wasn't a solution but a new creation birthed from the love and grace of God. Like a fountain, God's outpouring of love and creativity emanated from the Trinity out of his own pleasure.⁵

Because we're made in the image of God, we too can create and enjoy absent of any measurable need. The song we composed that dances in our head alone still holds value even when it's not topping charts or going viral on the internet. The wood-burning project we labored over can matter to the Lord even when it doesn't check any boxes of usefulness. The collection of bobbleheads on our desk may not fix any problems in our life, but that doesn't mean its existence is inconsequential. You and I can follow our Maker in creating and playing simply for the love of it.

But Learning Is Supposed to Be Hard

While chasing efficiency and productivity, we've overlooked the quiet instruction God has bound up within our hobbies. We know cracking open a textbook or a theology book will fill our head with knowledge, but we forget the ways God utilizes every piece of his world to teach—even our play. The ancient Greeks had a handle on this, as they believed in two different kinds of knowledge. The first they called discursive thought. This encompasses the posture of a student who actively searches, examines, and draws conclusions. We can see this play out within the more academic parts of our hobbies. We memorize bird calls, pore over the historical details of past generations, and learn new facts in our pleasure reading (even this book!). This kind of activity can

be fun and fulfilling on its own, yet the Greeks believed another form of knowledge also exists called contemplative vision. This knowledge isn't gained through effort but through the passive reception of the mind, which "conceives that which it sees."⁶

While we won't find these two terms in Scripture, evidence abounds that God's work and character are readily available for those who will receive it. "The heavens declare the glory of God," the psalmist cries (Psalm 19:1). Proverbs reminds us that the wisdom of God pours forth from his creation, and Paul tells us that the very rain from the heavens witnesses to his mercy (Proverbs 8; Acts 14:17). Jesus' parables and analogies prove our understanding of God can be enriched by playing within his world.

Our favorite pastimes provide us with far more than the knowledge and skills of discursive thought. In the background, our play reorients us to the truth of reality. When we move our bodies for the joy of it, we uncover greater understanding about how God formed us body and soul. We're drawn into worship at God's majesty while we hike a trail. As we gaze out our window at the birds in our feeder or care for our fish, we encounter his creativity and love and remember our call to care for the earth. Hobbies quietly remind us that life isn't all about productivity or our curated identity. We exist in Yahweh's world—recipients of his rule, his order, his tender mercies, his plan, and his beauty. This reality exists independent of our effort; we only need to step into it.

We're used to believing knowledge comes only through what we'd identify as hard work. Thomas Aquinas disagreed, saying virtue "regards the *good* rather than the difficult" (emphasis mine).⁷ We have ample opportunity to learn virtue within the

good hobbies we take part in every day. The God who revealed himself through Christ and the Scriptures continues to impart those same truths even through our play in his world. As Thomas Watson wrote, “The world is a looking glass in which we may see the power and goodness of God shine forth.”⁸

Created to Play

Can you see the potential within your play? Whether you love classic movies, rock climbing, or rolling homemade sushi, God has scattered opportunities to grow in worship. Your favorite hobbies will look very different from mine—and that’s good. Even still, among the variety, we’ll discover key similarities. The deepest joys of a coin collector aren’t that far removed from a thrifter. The motivations of a board game player can also be tethered to those of a sports fan. As we work through the different ways we play in the pages to come, we’re going to sift out ten different kinds of hobbyists based on the deeper joys that drive them. You’ll find intuitive pairings, but you might be surprised by others.

Each of these ten hobbyists take their place within a larger picture of what it means to be an image-bearer of God. For if it’s true that our Creator fashioned us for specific ends, it makes sense we would find joy and delight when we fulfill those ends—whether this is accomplished through vocation or avocation. These ten titles answer our Maker’s calls to fill the earth with his glory, tend what’s he’s given, gather and remake what’s been broken, and receive the gifts of his hand. Let’s take a closer look, and try to guess where your own joys might fit.

Fill the earth: Makers, Heralds, and Nourishers. The beauty and perfection of Eden was meant to extend and fill the whole

earth with God's glory. Unfortunately, sin ushered in death and darkness, but one day we can be sure that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). While we wait for that day, God's image-bearers get the opportunity to fill the earth with his glory in numerous ways. The greatest way we follow this mandate is by making disciples and training them up in the Lord (Matthew 28:19-20). Additionally, we can labor within our respective callings as employees, parents, and citizens in our communities. Yet we can fill up this world with reflections of God's glory even through our play.

Some of us will do so as Makers—hobbyists who love bringing new objects into existence. Whether it's a painting, a piece of furniture, a bar of soap, or the words of a poem, Makers use their careful skill to create something beautiful and in turn image their own Creator.

Heralds fulfill this mandate through expression. They are the singers, musicians, and orators who don't necessarily create something new but instead learn something beautiful and repeat the same beauty to another. They stand on stage with a guitar on Sunday and sit in the car belting out a song during a red light. We'll find them teaching in the community classrooms, sharing favorite quotes or pictures on the internet, or on the couch nestled close to their kids with a read-aloud.

Nourishers answer the call to fill the world with God's glory through the kitchen. They love the feel of a ball of dough beneath their palm or the anticipation of a new recipe. They fill the world by bringing satisfaction and delight to the bellies and souls of the people they love. Through lattes, a casserole dish, canned

preserves, or a smoked brisket, Nourishers satisfy with substance and decadence, just like their Father.

Tend what's been given: Movers and Keepers. Image-bearers not only add to the earth, but they also tend God's creation. Movers tend to their own frames. They work with their bodies and strengthen them through a game of tennis, a round of kickboxing, or an evening walk. The joy they feel as they drive a golf ball down the fairway or sink their kayak paddle into the water fills them up because God created them to move.

Others become Keepers of God's world with a small raised garden or a backyard enclosure of chickens. They dig their hands into the ground and nurture a bed of cut flowers or the tiny potted succulent in the window. The joy of nurturing another life, whether it be a plant or animal, reminds them that they were made to tend to the earth around them and steward it toward glory.

Gather and renew: Curators, Restorers, and Connectors. Of course, the good and perfect didn't last. The folly of Adam brought the curse of sin that infected all of creation. We not only create and fill, but on this side of the fall, we must also gather up and renew. Some of us do so in the role of the Curator. For these hobbyists, the joy resides in the hunt for the scattered. They reassemble and curate beauty in darkness through a puzzle, a collection, or even a wardrobe.

Restorers renew the broken. They take an old home, a forgotten piece of furniture, or a dirty car and reveal the potential waiting beneath the mess. The deep-seated joy of the Restorer propels them to push back against destruction and resurrect what's been damaged.

Connectors participate in renewing the connections to the image-bearers sitting across from them. They turn on the baseball game to connect with the action or pull up a seat at the table with a board game. They're the ham radio operators who seek out one more contact and the radio-control operators who can't wait to fly their drone. Connectors might even be found with a crossword or logic puzzle, delighting in the challenge and every lost link found.

Receive: *Historians and Beholders.* Often, the Lord calls his children to simply receive his good gifts. Historians do so by receiving the passage of history as it unfolds throughout generations. Their deepest joy lies in unearthing the past—whether it's through a documentary, a book, or an antique piece of furniture.

Finally, Beholders receive glimpses of the beautiful. They might find it camping in a forest, standing before a painting, or sitting in the theater with a box of popcorn. It hits those who are foodies and others who love looking at the stars. Beholders enjoy the beautiful, the delicious, and the incredible, and in doing so they stand in their rightful place as the recipients of their Creator's gifts.

Doorways to Worship

While you may have a few of these titles already picked out in your mind, I hope you look for yourself in every chapter to follow. I've grouped certain hobbies within each chapter, but opportunities for overlap abound. Breadmakers may be labeled as a Nourisher, but as they knead and form the dough, they become a Maker with every artistic score. The collection of recipes that fill up their binder transforms them into a Curator gathering bits of scattered gold, and they become a Historian when repeating the routines and steps of bakers from generations ago.

Traces of these titles are scattered throughout all of our play because God created these roles for all of us to inhabit. Exercise might feel far from your chosen hobby, but you might discover how even holding a needle and thread reorients you as a Mover working with your body. Collecting may seem boring, but you might gain a new perspective of the ways your favorite mystery read labels you a Curator on the hunt for clues. Throughout each chapter, you'll find sidebars that help to make these connections. As you read, I hope you discover more connections and further joys that motivate you in your play. These titles aren't fences to box us into specific identities but instead are doorways that can lead to greater reflection on the way the Lord uses our play for good.

As we move into the chapters to come, we'll not only view hobbies from a singular focus but look at them in terms of community—for many of us play together. We participate in book clubs, play on sports teams, and join organizations. The communal enjoyment of leisure adds another layer of depth and appreciation. We'll also take some time to identify a key temptation toward sin that each title might face.

Dorothy Sayers once wrote, “The notion that the artist is a vague, dreamy creature living in retreat from the facts of life is a false one.”⁹ The same is true for the hobbyist. We don't play apart from the realities of life, but within them. We pick up our paintbrush, tools, and instruments and live out the roles God created us to fulfill. We play, and we worship.

For too long we've overlooked the beauty God has fashioned within our play. Let's start paying attention.

Start Playing

1. Think through the hobbies you already enjoy. In which chapters do you expect to find them?
 2. Which lie about play pulls the strongest in your heart: Do you fear laziness or inefficiency? Have you believed that knowledge comes only from hard work?
 3. The next time you feel inclined to check off your to-do list, stop and do something fun instead. Spend a few moments with inefficiency.
 4. Make a list of some of the hobbies you enjoy, as well as some new hobbies you're interested in experiencing. As we embark on our journey through avocation, keep this list in mind and see if you'd like to add any more.
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