

I watch our rescue golden retriever, Bader, and our newest puppy, Francis, wrestle on the kitchen floor as I write. As one who is new to the rescue field, I marvel at what Bader's and Francis' engagement means. It is not just that young Francis is practicing how to fight, nor is it that young Francis is developing muscles that will enhance his growth, nor is it that young Francis is learning how to socialize in a pack. While all of these things are certainly true, young Francis is not the beneficiary of this "play". Bader is.

When we met Bader, we learned that he had been abandoned in Alabama, and he was probably around five years old. He possessed the features of a standard field dog. Lean, muscular, with a rich cinnamon coat and a profound penchant to retrieve. While he had not been as abused as tragically as some animals are, he clearly engaged the world in a number of ways driven by the neglect and uncertainty of his previous world. Growls dictated where and when he would be touched. Excessive licking expressed a nervousness and an acquiescing paradoxical to his growling. Constant action and vigilance to where the pack leaders were betrayed a desire to control the environment and to not be abandoned.

Of all of his actions, Bader's saddest was the simple fact that he did not know how to engage our other dog—Henry—who we had at the time. Henry is a beta, and thus he was an ideal companion. Eager to please, happy to be with any dog, and always deferential, Henry could never be a challenge to Bader. However, it was initially clear that Bader was trying to figure out what this new environment was and what it held for him. Thus, his engagements were, at times, almost dismissive of Henry and often paying no attention to Henry.

With time, the two dogs began to develop a rapport. In fits and starts, they began the dance that led to tentative "mouthing" to cautious "wrestling" to exploratory play. And with this activity, you could see the shell that Bader had developed to protect himself slowly begin to crack. And with each crack in the shell, you were offered a tiny glimpse of who this dog truly was. The vigilance and control began to subside into moments of relaxation and pure enjoyment. Nevertheless, a noise or a touch or fatigue would bring the protective shell back to full strength, and Bader seemed to return to square one.

While play with Henry continues to allow Bader to enter more fully into who he is, it is his play with Francis that is quite impressive. Play with Francis is totally disarming, and it opens the cracks to Bader's shell even wider, allowing a more complete view of who this dog is. Furthermore, this play seems to move those moments of relapse further and farther between. It is wonderful to witness the pure enjoyment of play and unconstrained engagement of living. And it makes me crazy that animals are treated in ways that make this scenario a reality.

Bader's development and transformation also makes me acutely aware of how his experience plays out in a myriad of ways in our own lives. Certainly, and tragically, there are those who have experienced unconscionable and inhuman abuse and neglect that erects a shell not just protecting the self, but, ultimately, hiding it from the view of others but also, sadly, from the view of the person him or herself. These awful scenarios often distract us from or qualify the way we interpret those experiences that move us to develop our own shell and to lose sight of who we are.

The theological imperative in all of these instances is that we are intended for life that allows us to live into who it is that God has created us to be. We are to be who we are. The fear and pain that meets us in so many places and moments in life quickly moves us to put up defenses and coping mechanisms. Often, these protective measures also move us away from being able to act out of our core of being and in whole-heartedness toward others and the world around us. Thus, you can see the vicious cycle we occupy. Exposed to pain we protect. Protecting moves us to possibly create pain for others or more pain for ourselves, and we continue to the scaffolding of protection that keeps us from ourselves.

The Christian community (and all true religions at their core) at its best is a place where we seek to practice playing so that we might begin to trust enough to allow the shell to crack a bit and allow the heart of our being to be revealed and find expression. When you think about it, the liturgy that we practice is a part of that dance that we do that reminds us of another way of being—all are welcome, peace is shared with all, there is enough food at the table for everyone, the core of the lessons are about grace, and whatever music we use opens us to beauty. And recognizing this alternative way of being, perhaps, we may be able to live more fully into that reality, who we are.

I see this activity played out on my kitchen floor as two dogs wrestle with each other. I glimpse it on Sunday in our worship, and I trust that it is active in fits and starts in our life together.