



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Notes of a Longtime Gamester

I do not know any dimension to contemporary spirituality that concerns me more, nor do I know any more fundamental test of authentic mysticism or prophecy than that of humor and play. The prophet or social-justice type who lacks a sense of humor is dangerous to be around, for there is a hint in that lacuna of a dualistic rather than a dialectical individual. The mystic who cannot laugh is a bogus mystic intent on using mysticism as a contemplative crutch, just as the prophet who cannot laugh is a bogus prophet using "peace and justice" as a new moralism and orthodoxy test.

—Matthew Fox: *Wrestling with the Prophets*

[Shelley Krause's renga piece](#) takes me back to the cooperative literary games which were a favorite pastime in my mother's family. Doubtless Quakers would have once considered them fatuous frivolities, distracting the creature from the pure Life and from good works, and untruthful withal. But in an age where amusements are increasingly passive, high-tech, and commodified, the spirit of true play—the kind that opens a window on what lies beyond our culture's one-dimensionality—is in dire need of preservation. My family's games have certainly played a crucial role in enabling me to keep such a window open.

Well, then: we wrote limericks, each person writing down a first line and passing the paper to next person, who wrote the next line, and so forth:

I cannot tell ceilings from stairs,
Nor rhinoceroses from bears;
When it comes to distinctions
'Twixt births and extinctions,
I gets so confused that I swears.

Another favorite was **Definitions**, in which the first person makes up a word, the second person defines it, and the third writes a poem using it.

From this evolved an all-purpose game which could be tailored to fit the players' fancy: Pass out paper and pencils, decide on subject matter and steps, and go to it. Some of our variations:

Book reviews. 1) imaginary book title; 2) author; 3) first sentence; 4) jacket blurb; 5) excerpt from review.

Recipes. 1) name of dish; 2) ingredients; 3) directions.

Election campaigns. 1) name of candidate and party; 2) office; 3) campaign slogan; 4) League of Women Voters question; 5) candidate's answer.

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Advertisements. 1) name of product; 2) picture, visual ad; 3) advertising slogan; 4) irate letter from consumer; 5) same letter edited into a testimonial.

Church orders of service. 1) Name of church; 2) minister; 3) hymn; 4) opening words, 5) congregational response; 6) kiddie sermon topic; 7) adult sermon topic, 8) announcement. In another version, played at a Unitarian church supper, we just wrote down the next thing that happened in the service until we ran out of steam.

As examples I mostly remember snatches—

The Church of the Spontaneous Perception. . . . A candidate for County Solicitor obfuscating about whether counties are best solicited from left to right, top to bottom, or alphabetically. . . . A recipe with the directions “sift dry ingredients 3 times, add eggs, sift again,” and after baking, “test for doneness with vacuum cleaner hose.”

Our cooperative poetry rarely got more exalted than limericks; but one poem, composed in 1947 (fifty years ago!) has become an enduring part of the family lore. It was written by eight of my relatives, going around the circle and each contributing one *word* per turn:

Evening

Nonfunctional stars in a saffron dome,
Oblivious, summon the wanderer home;
And mother—functional, chiffon, or
wise—
Drowns the kittens and blatantly lies.
Even the waspies, zooming along,
Feel despondent at evensong;
And mud turtles murmur beneath their
biers,
Huffily mourning the bygone years.
Anemones lift their lymphatic limbs
And fold their petals in silent whims.
Jaundiced, happy, untutored, calm,
The daisies wait for the atom bomb.

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