



08/12/2008 - **The Importance of Play** of Giorgio Abate

In thinking again about my son, something that happens rather often, I reflect on how much play was decisive in his life and education.

Thinking of these things leads me to consider how fortunate the little orphans are who are living in the cities that Maria Pia and I are visiting. They have nothing, not even mattresses to sleep on, but they feel fortunate to have a roof and a hot meal every day. They spend whole hours staring at the gray ceiling of the dormitory, and they remember when they were out in the rain...and they are happy.

If we think only of the children in Darfur, in Uganda, in Sierra Leone, or in Iraq, who are trained in arms from nine or ten years old and often disappear into the void, without leaving a trace, without a cry, and above all without the world's doing something or even taking notice....Not to speak of the world of prostitution, where six- or seven-year-old innocent "angels" are made into prostitutes by unscrupulous demons with the insidious complacency of clients about whom it is preferable to keep from voicing any kind of commentary. All these children are denied any form of life; they are deceived from the moment they come into the world—a horrible world full of suffering is presented to them, almost always without any manner of escape other than death.

I am taking for granted that someone is taking care of him, because that's the way it was with

my son, as I think it also was for all the children we can imagine. In fact, it isn't that way, and unfortunately it isn't in most cases....Statistics speak clearly: only 17% of children in the world live an infancy worthy of being considered as such. In most cases, children grow up in the most total indigence, not only being denied the right to play, which most times is seen as the least of problems, but having to run up from the most tender age against problems which in our world would intimidate more than a few thirty-year-olds, still children of their family.

I have always believed that in every child it must be natural to develop his own will to play, as if this were part of the human being, like appetite, thirst, the instinct to walk or to run... .But I didn't realize how important were the stimuli that we adults are induced to give them, even without being aware of it. When a child comes into the world within a family, everything is transformed, everything takes on a different light. We are induced to prepare a room for the newborn, giving it a pleasing appearance.

We fill it with playthings, we paint the walls a happy color, so that from the first day of life he gets the message, "We love you, and we're happy that you've come!" No matter how improbable it may seem, the child receives this message right away and begins his psychological and physical development. A serene child eats, sleeps, smiles, and cries only if he wishes to communicate or to attract the attention of the mommy or of whoever is taking care of him at that moment...

When they then find out that they can in fact "play" and also live some moments of infantile light-heartedness...then that's magic.