

Born to Play

By Gwen Gordon

“Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy birthday dear Gwennie, Happy Birthday to you.”

I loved my birthdays growing up; having all my friends sing my name, wait for me to make a big wish, and watch me blow out the candles. It gave me a thrill. I loved the special games with cheap prizes that got lost or broken by the end of the week. I loved being the birthday girl in my birthday hat and birthday dress, more tomboy than princess, but royally enthroned nonetheless. And I loved, above all, the fact that I didn't have to do anything to deserve it. Birthdays happened even if my room was messy, my report card disappointing, and my teeth unbrushed. It was enough just to be born. Hooray! Let's celebrate!

Every time somebody smiled and sang to me, I arrived into the world a little more fully. Our bodies may pop onto the scene all at once on one special day, but our souls emerge more slowly. They need to know they're safe, welcomed, seen, and celebrated and, while we deserve to feel that everyday, birthdays are a special opportunity to remember.

And, of course, it doesn't always work out that way. Parents are human, plans fall through, the world doesn't, as it turns out, actually revolve around us. That's why, birthdays can be complicated and disappointing. Everything that happens on that day seems to be a measure of your worthiness. Somebody forgets and doesn't call and it

stings. Last minute cancellations are a problem. Some years have been more challenging for me than others, with the inevitable losses and disappointments accumulating along the way. But I've always managed to not take them too personally. It wasn't until a few years ago that I faced the biggest forces that threaten my special day of celebration.

September 11th happens to be my birthday. When the day was hijacked by world events, grief, terror, and seriousness, the little birthday girl took it very personally. "Wait, that's MY day." Sure, there can be pain and suffering in the world, but for just one day a year, I don't want to have to think about it, thank you very much. I just want to celebrate ME. Can't the world please stop for one day a year just to adore me? How dare the world get so distracted.

The hijackers who attacked the World Trade Center wrote in a letter later published in the New York Times, "Purify your soul from all unclean things. Completely forget something called 'this world'. The time for play is over, and the serious time is upon us." September 11th has come to represent the beginning of serious times - times that birthday girls don't and probably should not have to understand.

Suddenly I wasn't sure how to celebrate being born in a world that had become so terrifying. I wasn't even sure I wanted to be in the world anymore. So, in 2002, I decided to avoid the whole issue. My birthday party invitation read:

There once was a girl named Gwenneth
Who was born on September Eleventh,
But when the plane hit those towers,
And terror raged its new powers,
She decided to celebrate on the Seventh.

I was glad when September 12 came along.

The next year, I had gained a little courage and rallied myself behind a plan. I

would spend the day alone in nature as a kind of vision quest to help me get reoriented to a world beyond my 5 year old ego's needs, and beyond terrorism. I would come to terms with the complexity of this day by spending it outside in nature. I slept the night before under the stars, dancing and singing to what happened to be a perfect full moon. My birthday was glorious. I was honored with the good company of fox, raccoon, heron, and egret. The weather held and the water sparkled. I napped on warm rocks, skinny dipped in a lake, and celebrated the magnificence of our beautiful world. Yes, it was good to be alive, after all.

As lovely as the day was, if I were completely honest with myself, I could still feel myself subtly and gently holding the darkness and terror of the world at bay. And why not? What's wrong with taking a day just to behold the beauty of the world? Nothing. I just had a sense that being born on this day was calling me to something bigger. It seemed to be insisting that I take the birthday girl right into a world filled with both beauty and terror and say "yes" to it all. Maybe next year.

On 2004, I had a setback. September 11, 2001 was not, as it turned out, an anomaly. There happens to be quite an historical link between terror and September 11. On that day in 1973 Pinochet seized power in a U.S. backed coup, killing Salvador Allende. On September 11, 1990, the Guatemalan anthropologist, Myrna Mack, was killed by security forces. On September 11, 1977, Steven Biko, the founder of the black consciousness movement in South Africa was beaten to death by enforcers of apartheid. On September 11, 1988, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide was preaching in a church when thugs moved in and massacred the congregants. Five years later, on September 11, 1993, a Haitian businessman named Antoine Izmary marched with other Haitians to remember those

killed five years before and was forced to his knees and executed in broad daylight. On September 11, 1971, there was an uprising at Attica state prison where prisoners protested terrible conditions. Two days later, the state troopers opened fire killing 39 prisoners and guards and critically wounding 88 others. No other single day of the year has such a bloody history.

On September 11, 1963, at 9:00 a.m., I, Gwen Allison Gordon, was born to Barbara and Norman Gordon in Cincinnati, Ohio, youngest of four, weighing a healthy 8 lbs. 2 oz. Could anything born on such a cursed day be a gift to the world?

Another year passed (they seemed to be passing faster). That year, hurricane Katrina victims were still being evacuated, the death toll of Iraqis and U.S. soldiers was mounting. Torture, corruption, loss of civil rights, and climate change had all escalated. There were more horrors than ever. I signed up to volunteer at the Red Cross for the day, but changed my plans in the last minute. I was determined to bring my full presence to the world, not to hide in either action or retreat. So, I decided to spend the day with one of my beloved teachers and friends, Joanna Macy, who has always inspired me with her unflinching presence with the world. She was leading a special day of practice at Spirit Rock on Sept. 11 and I joined her.

With a room full of fellow seekers and Joanna's fiercely tender leadership, my defenses melted. I just wept. I wept for the toxic waters, the warming oceans, and the extinction of species. I wept for the insanity of our government and the tortured detainees and the rest of us whose rights are being ripped away. I wept for the citizens of Iraq and for the idealistic American soldiers and their families. I wept for the beautiful city of New Orleans and its stranded citizens. I wept for the absence of truth in the halls of power and

I wept for all the people who aren't able to weep at this grievous time. I let myself wish that I had never been born and curse the burden of being alive at this time. And then, even when I thought I had emptied every grief from my heart, I still wept. But the tears that had been bitter, were becoming sweet.

My grief had carved a huge space in my heart, which filled almost instantly with joy and love and praise. For the first time that day, I looked into the eyes of others whose hearts were also broken by their love for the world and I felt joyfully connected, lighter and freer. I imagined the future generations inheriting our world and I spoke quietly to them, letting them know what it's like being alive now and how I think about them as I do what I can on their behalf. I let myself imagine receiving their encouragement and compassion, and gratitude. I swear I could feel the unborn future cheering all of us on in the quiet reaches of my heart.

As I beheld the beautiful faces around me, all lovers of our world, for the first time since 2001 I didn't feel any ambivalence about being alive. It seems grief can open the doors to praise. Grief and praise are twins, rising from the same breath. As the Mayan's teach, our grief is our praise; they awaken in each other's arms.

Determined to make my birthday celebration more than just a superficial attempt to escape or defend against the pain of the world, I found the presence that makes it possible to celebrate no matter what's going on. The hijackers were right when they said, "Forget this world. The time for play is over." Forgetting the world does end the play. It is in remembering the world in all its messy, mortal, material depth that the play is truly liberated. It takes a lot of courage to love this world, especially as it rips at the seams. But

if we hold back our grief back we also hold back our love and that's the greatest suffering of all.

Since the terrorists crashed my birthday party, every September 11th, I dedicate myself to remembering the world, its beauty and terror. I remember that I don't have to be afraid of the pain, that when I come present to it, pain becomes peace becomes joy becomes a sneeze. The river flows, the muses sing, the play goes on. Letting in the pain, lets this wild, gorgeous resilient world play right through me revealing how it is made through and through of love, even on September 11th. While suicide bombers risk their lives for a cause, we need to risk our causes, our beliefs, and identities, for life itself. Every year, on September 11th, I'm learning to find my way back to the birthday party at the core of life where every being is a birthday girl. From the front lines, I can report that the time for seriousness is over and the time for play upon us. Happy Birthday to you!!!