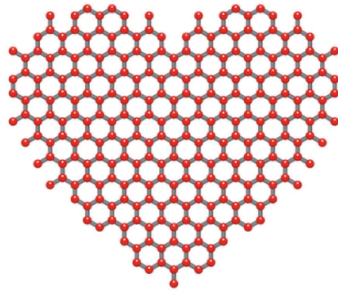


# ♥ Life as a Game of Hearts ♥

Candace Brower



Thank you, Dianne, for that introduction, and thanks to those of you who came back to hear my third sermon. A special thanks to the members of the Children's Choir for their wonderful performance and their parents for bringing them. I hope to make it worth your while to stay for my sermon, "Life as a Game of Hearts" which is about a game for all ages.



George Lakoff & Mark Johnson  
*Metaphors We Live By* (1980)

## Conceptual Metaphor:

- Life as a "journey"
  - *I'm at a "crossroads."*
  - *I'm "spinning my wheels."*
  - *I'm "flying high."*
  - *I'm in a "downward spiral."*
- Life as a "card game"
  - *That's the luck of the "draw."*
  - *I wasn't "dealt a very good hand."*
  - *If I "play my cards right"...*
  - *I've got an "ace up my sleeve."*

The title of my talk was inspired by this wonderful little book, *Metaphors We Live By*, by linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson. In it, the authors explain that much of what happens to us in everyday life is difficult to think about without the use of metaphor. What they call conceptual metaphors differ from poetic metaphors in that they serve a much more practical purpose, that is, they help us think.

Here are a couple of examples to help you understand what they mean by conceptual metaphor. One of the ways that we think about life is as if it were a journey. We imagine that we are in some kind of vehicle, a plane, a boat or a car as when we say "I'm in the driver's seat," or "I've been spinning my wheels" or "I'm stuck in a rut." We also visualize our life's journey as going up or down, depending upon how well our lives are going at the moment. We may say things like "I'm in a downward spiral" or "I'm rising in the ranks" or "I'm aiming for the stars."

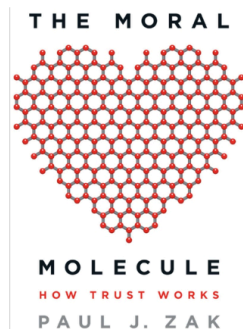
At other times, we talk about life as if it were a card game. We use this metaphor to remind ourselves that how our lives turn out is partly a matter of luck, but that we can also have some control over how things turn out by strategizing about the future. When we want to stress the element of luck we may say “that’s the luck of the draw,” or “I wasn’t dealt a very good hand.” But when we want to think about what to do next, we may say things like “if I play my cards right,” or “I’ve got an ace up my sleeve.”

The metaphor of Life as a Game of Hearts elaborates upon the metaphor of life as a card game, and I hope to persuade you that it is a very useful way to think about life.

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the traditional version of the game of Hearts in which hearts are bad and you win by giving away as many hearts as possible, along with the queen of spades. One of the things I’ve always enjoyed about the traditional game is that you can reserve your hearts and the queen of spades to give to the player in first place at the last minute.

The traditional game of hearts, like most card games, is based on competition, which means that only one player can win. The metaphorical Game of Hearts, on the other hand, is based on cooperation, which means that everyone can win. In the metaphorical Game of Hearts, a heart is an act of kindness, that is playing a heart is doing something that makes someone else feel good. Conversely, playing a spade is doing something that makes someone else feel bad. The goal of the game is for all of the players to play as many hearts as possible, and the more hearts that everyone plays, the more everyone wins.

## Oxytocin: The “Feel-Good” Chemical that Rewards Acts of Kindness



### Oxytocin:

- Motivates and rewards acts of kindness.
- Motivates and rewards cooperation.
- Fuels feelings of love.
- Fuels feelings of trust.
- Fuels feelings of connectedness.
- Fuels feelings of “we-happiness.”

To help you understand what makes it a win-win game, I want to remind you of the book I told you about in my last sermon, *The Moral Molecule*, by neuroscientist Paul Zak. In it, Zak explains that whenever we perform acts of kindness, we are rewarded by the release of oxytocin, which not only makes us feel all warm and fuzzy inside, but motivates us to perform those acts again and again. Oxytocin is also released in those whom we treat with kindness, motivating them to do the same for others. And since oxytocin also motivates cooperation, the oxytocin that is

released makes it easier for us to work together, while fueling our feelings of love, trust, and connectedness, and a special kind of happiness known as “we-happiness,” which differs from the “me-happiness” that we get when we do things for our own sake.

This helps to explain how the metaphorical game of hearts makes it possible for everyone to win. The metaphorical game also has the advantage over the traditional game in that it can be played just about anywhere or any time and there is no limit to the size of group that can play the game. I know a lot of members of this congregation enjoy playing games. I’ll never forget last year’s New Years Eve party, where I got to play Cards Against Humanity with some folks I never dreamed would play the game, and one of the things I especially enjoyed was hearing Dianne Whittaker laugh harder than I have ever heard anyone laugh in my life.

So I would like to ask those of you who are here, how many would like to learn how to play the metaphorical game of hearts? Raise your hands and I will ask the folks with the collection baskets to pass out the instructions for playing the game.

I made plenty of copies, so feel free to take as many as you like, in case you want to share the game with others. The back of the card has all of the basic instructions for playing the game, as well as a QR code that will take you to a webpage where you can download a copy of today’s sermon, in which I will be providing you with the rest of the instructions that you need to play the game.

## How to Play the “Game of Hearts”

Doing something that makes someone else feel **good**  
is playing a “**heart**.”

Doing something that makes someone else feel **bad**  
is playing a “**spade**.”



Strategies for winning the game:

1. Play as many “**hearts**” as you can.
2. Play at least 3 times as many “**hearts**” as “**spades**.”
3. Play only the “**spades**” that are needed.
4. Play “**hearts**” before “**spades**” (lead with a “**heart**”).
5. If someone else plays a “**heart**,” say “thank you for that heart.”
6. If someone else plays a “**spade**,” say “that was a spade.”

If you look at the back of the card, you will see that the instructions for the game are extremely simple. There are only two kinds of cards, hearts and spades. Playing a heart is doing something that makes someone feel good, while playing a spade is doing something that makes someone feel bad. Although there are no rules, there are strategies that you can use to help you win the game. The more strategies that you apply, the more likely it is that everyone will win.

The game is very easy to play and in fact it makes a wonderful family game. In my last sermon, I told you about the study that was done on toddlers that showed that even very

young children enjoy being kind, and they do so spontaneously without having to be taught. When I shared the game of hearts with my three- and five-year-old grandchildren, they immediately started hugging one another and giving hugs and kisses to their parents and saying “I love you,” and I could tell that everyone in the family was thoroughly enjoying the game.

### **1. Play as many “hearts” as you can.**

The first strategy is simply to play as many hearts as you can. Once you make that your goal, you are likely to start noticing just how many opportunities you have to play hearts. There are many little hearts that you can play, like saying the words “please” and “thank you.” I once asked my five-year-old granddaughter if she knew what made “please” and “thank you” magic words, and she responded: “Because they help you get what you want?” I told her “no,” that the reason they are magic words is because they feel as good to say as they do to hear. She immediately started to thank me for every bite of the grapefruit that I was sharing with her at breakfast, and I could see her savoring the words coming out of her mouth with each bite.

In today’s story for all ages, we learned lots of other ways to play hearts—helping with chores, returning a lost item, or listening to someone tell a story. But some of the biggest hearts that we can play consist not of actions but of words, words that may take little effort to say, but when offered sincerely, can make another person feel very warm and fuzzy inside.

Here are three big hearts that can be played with just a few words. The first is to tell someone what you appreciate about them, the second is to tell them what you admire about them, the third is to tell them what you think they have done well.

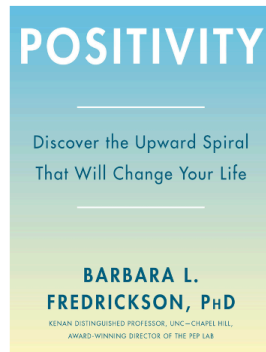
As I once shared with you during joys and sorrows, I grew up in a home where there were no hugs, kisses, or I love yous. Yet one of the biggest hearts I ever received was given to me by my father, much later in life when I showed him an article I was getting ready for publication and asked for his feedback. After reading it, he responded with one word: “excellent.” Decades later, that word still rings in my ears and fills me with pride, in part because I knew how much honesty mattered to my father, so I knew he was being completely sincere.

I recently received another big heart from someone right here in this fellowship. Shortly after I gave my second sermon, this person handed me an envelope with a card inside that said “Be strong. Who you are is impactful and inspiring.” That message still fills my heart with warm feelings, and I still carry it around with me so that I can reread it from time to time. So I hope you can see just how little it can take to make someone else feel good, and how easy it can be to create warm feelings that can last a very long time.

### **2. Play at least 3 times as many “hearts” as “spades.”**

The second strategy is to play at least 3 times as many hearts as spades. You may be wondering, why 3? Why not 2, 4 or 5 times as many hearts as spades?

## Playing More “Hearts” than “Spades” Helps to Create an “Upward Spiral”



- Individuals who maintain at least a 3-to-1 ratio of positivity to negativity tend to flourish; those who do not tend to languish.
- Groups who maintain at least a 3-to-1 ratio of positivity to negativity also tend to flourish; those who do not tend to languish.

The answer is to be found in this book, *Positivity*, by psychologist Barbara Fredrickson. Fredrickson did a study in which she had subjects record their positive and negative emotions over time. She compared this ratio to how successful they had been in their lives, whether they were flourishing, languishing or somewhere in between. She found a marked difference between those who achieved a 3 to 1 ratio of positive to negative emotions and those who fell below the mark. Other studies done with business teams found a similar ratio. Teams who reported at least three positive interactions to each negative one maintained an upward spiral of growth and profitability, while the teams who fell below that mark did not do as well.

This made Fredrickson wonder, how much positivity should we strive for in our lives? Could it be that negative emotions serve no useful purpose and that we would be better off without them? It turns out that we do need our negative emotions to keep us grounded in reality. Fredrickson explains this in terms of a metaphorical sailboat which is three times higher above the water than it is below. Our positive emotions are the mast and sail rising high to catch the wind and propel us forward and our negative emotions are the keel below which stabilizes the boat and keeps us on an “even keel.”

So what do Fredrickson’s findings tell us about how to have a winning hand in the game of hearts? First, it suggests that we should hold on to as many hearts as we can, while discarding as many spades as we can, and keep only the spades that are needed. Spades that rarely serve a useful purpose include arguing, criticizing, getting angry, complaining, being pessimistic, and finally doing what I like to call “shoulding,” that is telling someone else what they should or shouldn’t do.

It is when we are feeling irritable or under stress that we are likely to play these kinds of spades. We don’t intend to start an argument or lose our temper or throw cold water on someone else’s ideas, it just seems to happen from time to time. Fortunately, there is a heart that you can play that will help to dissolve any bad feelings you may have created, namely saying the words, “I’m sorry.” Saying “I’m sorry” gives the other person an opportunity to play a

heart back by saying, "I forgive you." These two hearts work well together to restore feelings of love, respect, and trust after a round of spades has been played.

### **3. Play only the "spades" that are needed.**

This brings us to the third strategy, which is to play only the spades that are needed. Once we have discarded all of our unneeded spades, what kinds of spades do we want to leave in our hand? These are the ones that, as Fredrickson says, may be needed to help ground someone else in reality. Perhaps you have an adult child living at home in need of some "tough love," or an employee who needs to be told that unless their work improves, they will be out of a job. Spades like these can be just as hard to give as to receive, yet holding them back is likely to make a bad situation even worse.

### **4. Play "hearts" before "spades" (lead with a "heart").**

This is where it helps to apply the fourth strategy; that is, to play hearts before spades. It helps to strategize in advance which cards you will play and in what order. It also helps to play only one spade at a time and to surround that spade with as many hearts as possible. You might want to begin by telling the other person what you respect, love and admire about them and what they are doing right before you tell them where they are falling short. By saying things at the beginning that build their confidence and self-esteem, you make it easier for them to accept the dose of reality that you have to offer them.

Playing hearts before spades can also be helpful for resolving arguments or even preventing them in the first place. As Lakoff and Johnson point out, we tend to conceptualize argument as war, which is to say that whenever we start to argue, we start to think of the other person as an adversary rather than an ally, and because arguments are something we either win or lose, we start to attack the other person's point of view while defending our own. Unfortunately, arguments have a way of repeating themselves, causing opposing points of view to harden, and leaving the two parties further apart than ever.

Here are some hearts that you can use to keep an otherwise friendly conversation from turning into an argument. At the point where you would usually say "I disagree," or "you're wrong," instead say, "here's how I agree with you" or "here is how I think you are right." Stating the ways you agree up front helps to create common ground that will make your differences appear to be much smaller and more susceptible to resolution. This also preserves your relationship as allies in search of mutual understanding, which makes it much more likely that you will reach a compromise or even synthesize your opposing points of view.

### **5. If someone else plays a "heart," say "thank you for that heart."**

The fifth strategy is to thank others for the hearts they play. Thanking someone for a heart not only gives you an opportunity to play another heart, but it also lets the other person know that the heart they played hit its mark. In fact, I would like to take this opportunity to say to everyone who has ever nodded and smiled at me after I shared something during joys and

sorrows, or told me how much you enjoyed my sermon, thank you for all of your hearts. One of the things I especially appreciate about our Fellowship is how many of its members are already in the habit of playing hearts, which makes it a joy to be here.

#### **6. If someone else plays a “spade,” say “that was a spade.”**

The sixth strategy is to let others know when they have played a spade. Negative feedback like this can make the other person feel bad in the moment, but it will help them to know what not to say or do in the future. We don't always know what effect our words will have on others. Sometimes we may think we are being kind and helpful but it turns out that our efforts have the opposite effect. One time years ago when my teenage granddaughter was in a state of emotional turmoil, I made the mistake of telling her to “calm down,” and she let me know that it was the worst possible thing I could say to her because it made her feel even more agitated and out of control. Hearing how my words made her feel helped me to become more attuned to her feelings and helped us to become closer over time.

If someone plays you a spade and you know that they had good intentions, it can be very helpful to say, “for me, that was a spade.” This will help to relieve any guilt they may be feeling for what they did by letting them know that while what they did or said was bad for you, it might have been perfectly OK or even good for someone else.

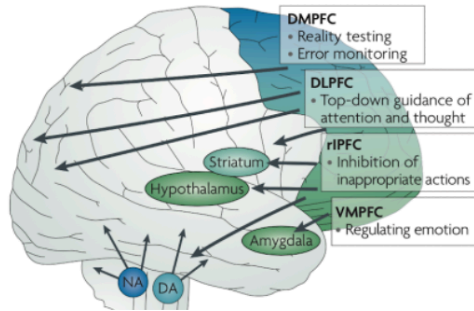
Calling a spade a spade can also help you confront behavior that is purposefully bad. Recall the scene in today's story where the little girl saw someone being bullied but was afraid to say anything. If she belonged to a group of friends who were also bothered by the bullying behavior, they could agree to confront the bully as a group and call him out for his bad behavior. One of them could say “why are you being so mean?” another could say “what did he ever do to you?” and another “why don't you try being nice for a change?” Positive peer pressure can be very effective in situations like these and might even cause the bully to experience a change of heart.

One last advantage of playing the metaphorical game of hearts is that it can be a very effective antidote for stress. Given how much we have to worry about in today's world, many of us struggle to keep feelings of anxiety at bay. We can do many things to soothe our feelings of anxiety—meditate, exercise, listen to music, or spend time in nature—but I have never found a method of stress reduction quite as effective as playing a round of hearts.

Before I explain how playing the game of hearts can help to reduce stress, I want to show you what your brain looks like under stress, as shown on the next slide.

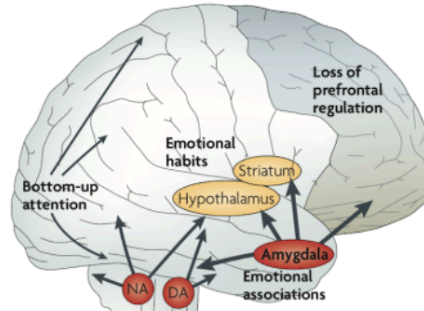
# Playing the Game of Hearts Can Be an Antidote to Stress and Anxiety

a Prefrontal regulation during alert, non-stress conditions



Arnsten 2009, "Stress signalling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function"

b Amygdala control during stress conditions



- Feelings of fear and anxiety
- Stress response (freeze, flight, fight)
- Release of stress hormones (cortisol, adrenaline)
- **Oxytocin** levels go **down**

The picture on the left shows your brain when it is functioning normally. The largish green and blue region on the right with the arrows pointing backward is the prefrontal cortex. The backward pointing arrows show that under normal conditions the prefrontal cortex controls the workings of the rest of the brain. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that we use to carry out our high-level thought processes, including strategizing about the future.

The picture on the right shows what happens to our brain under stress. The experience of being under threat causes the amygdala to fire, which now appears in red. As you may be aware, the amygdala is the fear center of the brain, the part that gets easily triggered in those who suffer from PTSD. When the amygdala fires, it launches a cascade of activity in the brain and the body, including the freeze, flight, fight response and the release of the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. At the same time that our levels of stress hormones go up, our oxytocin levels go down, which helps to explain why stress feels so bad.

Another thing that happens when we feel threatened is that control over the workings of the rest of the brain shifts from the prefrontal cortex to the amygdala, as represented by the black arrows. At the same time, increased levels of stress hormones cause the prefrontal cortex to go offline, now shown in gray, making it very difficult for us to think. We are no longer able to focus, to pay attention, and our short-term memory starts to fail us. This is not the kind of brain we want to have when we are facing a crisis. You can think of the prefrontal cortex as the mind's "windshield"—the part of the brain through which we peer to see what's coming next. Unfortunately, stress causes our windshield to fog up, making it hard for us to see the spots of light that could be places of safety or to see a pathway forward.

At one point, Fredrickson uses the metaphor of a water lily to explain what happens to our minds when we experience positivity. Our positive feelings are like the sun coming out,

opening our minds, like the water lily so that we can see and think clearly again. What makes the game of hearts such an effective antidote to stress is that it releases oxytocin, and when our oxytocin levels go up, our levels of stress hormones go down, allowing our minds to open up again so that we can see and think clearly about what to do next.

So the next time the news of the day leaves you feeling anxious and unable to sleep at night, try thinking about the hearts you will play the next day and to whom. Think about how good it will feel to tell a friend what you admire about them and how grateful you are for all of the ways they have helped you in the past. And after you have decided which hearts you will play the next day, tuck them under your pillow so that they can help you get a good night's sleep.

I would like to close today with the opening words of Martin Luther King's famous speech, "I have a dream." In my own dream, I see a future in which people everywhere, all around the world, have learned to play the game of hearts. In my dream, I see parents teaching the game to their children, and their children teaching it to their friends, and sharing the game on Facebook with friends who then share it with friends, until everyone has learned how to play the game. Perhaps by teaching our children how to play the game of hearts, we can inoculate them against the toxic effects of hatred, fear, and distrust that are on the rise today. Perhaps the acts of kindness that each of us performs each day can become the seeds that allow hearts to sprout everywhere. Thank you for sharing my dream and for being here with me today.