

**THE GAME OF LIFE  
AND HOW TO PLAY IT  
THE SELF-HELP  
CLASSIC**

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AND HOW TO PLAY IT  
THE SELF-HELP CLASSIC**  
THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

FLORENCE SCOVEL SHINN  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

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# **THE GAME OF LIFE AND HOW TO PLAY IT**

**The Self-Help Classic**

Florence Scovel Shinn

With an Introduction by  
TOM BUTLER-BOWDON



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# An Introduction

By Tom Butler-Bowdon

*The Game of Life and How to Play It* is not the biggest-selling self-help title of all time, nor is it the most famous. But since its appearance in 1925, Florence Scovel Shinn's short book has brought quiet inspiration and reassurance to millions. Readers find that it offers a mental release from whatever is troubling them. It provides a crucial reminder of the eternal spiritual laws that inform everything, from the flow of money to relationships to good health.

The universe works according to a perfect law of giving and receiving, Scovel Shinn said. Whatever you give out must come back to you in some form. If you love, you'll be loved. If you hate, you'll receive hate. If you lie, you'll be lied to. This for her was the central teaching of the Bible, of which she was a life-long student. She also knew it as the law of Karma. Yet it is a law that is as much a part of humanist ethics as religion. As the philosopher Immanuel Kant put it in *Critique of Practical Reason*: 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily reflection is occupied with them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me.'

When we get into difficult situations, or we have some strong desire that is not being fulfilled, it is nearly always because we have forgotten universal spiritual law or have tried to thwart it. Driven by our emotions, we see the world only through the bubble of our wants and desires, irrespective of whether they are in line with the true design for our lives.

Until now, you may have conceived of life as a battle involving your will against everyone else's. But this is



exhausting, and there is a path of less resistance. Scovel Shinn tried to show that the game of life makes a lot more sense when we recognize its metaphysical rules - to live in tune with the universe, not against it. By taking this path, you become a person of faith instead of fear, and live in a relaxed certainty about success.

## **Who Was She?**

To understand Scovel Shinn and her philosophy, we need to know something of her cultural background and the spiritual tradition of which she was a part.

Florence Scovel was born in Camden, New Jersey, in 1871. Her father, Alden Cortlandt Scovel, was a lawyer. Her mother, Emily Hopkinson Scovel, came from a family that could be traced back to the early days of British settlement on America's East Coast. Emily's grandfather, Francis Hopkinson, was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and designed the first official American flag.

Florence attended Friends' Central School in Philadelphia, a private Quaker school. She then studied art for several years at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. It was there that she met Everett Shinn, who was studying painting. 'Flossie' Scovel was both pretty and witty, and love blossomed. Although Everett was not a conventionally good match, it helped that he was also from a Quaker family in New Jersey.

The pair married after she graduated, and they moved to New York City. Everett worked in the theatre and Florence began to get freelance illustration jobs. As a measure of her success, in 1902 she became an associate member of the city's Society of Illustrators, at a time when it consisted almost entirely of men.



Florence Scovel Shinn, around 1902-03

The couple bought a house at 112 Waverly Place near Washington Square in Lower Manhattan. Florence spent her time illustrating for popular magazines such as *Harper's* and *Collier's*, and also worked on adult and children's books. Everett meanwhile wrote plays and formed a theatre group, the Waverly Players, with Florence sometimes acting in productions.

Everett was something of a dandy; he enjoyed the high life and would become a successful artist. He was known for his urban realist painting and was part of 'The Eight' and later the Ashcan School. Its members were known for gritty depictions of American city life, including tenement buildings, street scenes, and the life of immigrants.

Florence and Everett seemed very compatible and devoted, but according to Everett Shinn's biographer, Edith DeShazo, Florence dreaded becoming pregnant. This naturally limited their love life, and Everett began to be seen in the company of other women.

In 1912, after 14 years together, Florence filed for divorce. In court, she charged that Everett had been seen in a Broadway hotel three times with an unidentified woman, which brought tabloid headlines. She was allowed to revert to her maiden name, Scovel, and was awarded \$4,800 a year in alimony - quite a lot of money in the 1920s. Everett would later lose most of his money in the Great Depression. He would have three more wives and two children.

As for Florence, a *New York Times* obituary of October 18, 1940, records her as having died at home at 1136 Fifth Avenue, 'after an illness of several weeks'. Her address, on one of New York's nicest streets and overlooking Central Park, suggests she ended her days in comfort.

What do we know of the 28 years between Florence's marriage ending in 1912, and her death at the age of 69 in 1940?

Next, let's try to reconstruct the arc of her life, and look at some of her key teachings.

## **Universal Abundance**

After the pain of her divorce, Florence - now in her forties - entered a period of reflection.

With her illustrator days apparently behind her, she began carving out a career as a metaphysical teacher - or what today we might call a spiritual life coach. People - mostly women - would come to her apartment and receive 'treatments'. The women were often in desperate situations

involving relationships or money and needed support and solace.

In *The Game of Life*, she relates how one woman needed \$3,000 by the first of the month to repay a debt, and another had to find an apartment soon or she would be on the streets. The women were asked to repeat statements such as: 'Spirit is never too late. I give thanks that I have received the money on the invisible plane and that it manifests on time.' One woman had only a day to go until a payment was due. But she took on board Florence's advice, and tried to keep calm and positive. It then happened that a cousin made a surprise visit. He asked, as he was leaving, 'By the way, how are your finances?' She was able to make her overdue payment the next day.

If you ignore prompts to be generous and cling on to your money, Scovel Shinn says, 'the same amount of money will go in an uninteresting or unhappy way'. We must always remember that the game of life is about giving and receiving. Whatever you give always comes back to you, sometimes quickly, sometimes when you least expect it. If you can constantly remind yourself that the universe is incredibly abundant, you enter the flow of universal wealth. When you insist that anything is yours alone, you cut yourself off from the flow.

## **Speak the Word**

A woman who had hit hard times came to Florence. She was constantly on the move because of lack of funds. She had previously lived in a nice home, had beautiful things, and plenty of money. But when she was sometimes exasperated with the management of it all, she'd say, 'I'm sick and tired of things - I wish I lived in a trunk.' A couple of years later, her wish came true, and she was homeless.

The subconscious mind, Scovel Shinn says, has no sense of humour. We have to be super careful about our idle remarks, and ensure they always conform to a positive view of life. Even if at present we have little money or love in our life, we should bless what little we have. If we're thankful that there is so much abundance and love in the world, it's more likely that we'll develop a relaxed certainty that more will flow to us. If we focus on what we lack, that will create its manifestation in reality.

Why is Scovel Shinn so focused on the spoken word? There is a Quaker saying: 'When you pray, move your feet'. This means that although universal law or God is all powerful, we are at the same time co-creators of the universe. We have to make the first move, she says, whether that means a statement, a desire, or something imagined.

The people who came to see Florence would ask her to 'speak the word'. She would give them some affirmation for their particular situation which they had to go away and state many times a day, sometimes over a period of months. If they persisted, they often had miraculous results. The reason, she would explain, is that the positive words create an aura of protection around the person who speaks them. When we eliminate the negativity within ourselves, we can't be influenced by the negativity in others. By blessing your enemy, he or she is robbed of their ammunition.

## **The Divine Design**

Sometimes, we get a mental flash of what we could achieve, or the person we could be. It comes across as too good to be true, so we dismiss it from our minds. In fact, Scovel Shinn says, we've actually received a snapshot of our 'divine design' from the universe - a unique promise that only we can fulfil. Plato called it the 'perfect pattern', and it's our job to see it realized. If you don't yet know what

your life is about, she told her clients, ask for a sign or a message. Don't be scared that it won't be what you want, as it will invariably fulfil your deepest longing.

Part of your divine design may be a relationship. Scovel Shinn tells how a woman came to her who was desperately in love with a man who seemed to want nothing to do with her. She wanted Florence to 'speak the word' so that the man would come around. But Florence refused. She instead invoked the power of 'divine selection': if this man was right for the woman according to universal law, he would come to her. If he wasn't, he'd fall out of the picture.

What happened? Not long after, the woman quickly fell in love with another man, and wondered what she'd ever seen in the first one. The message: let universal intelligence, or God, or the power within you (call it what you like, but it must be beyond the normal conscious mind) decide if something accords with your divine design. The answer you get will be infallible.

## **The Universe is Powered by Faith**

Life seems to be so solid that it's tempting to only look at 'the facts' in the here and now. Yet much of our reality has come into being through things that people once only imagined. The game of life seems to be won by those who choose faith over fear. As Scovel Shinn puts it, 'Man must prepare for the thing he has asked for, *when there isn't the slightest sign of it in sight.*' It's precisely at this point that we need to be assured, giving thanks that what we've imagined has already been received. Looking back on your life so far and what you've achieved, it's more likely that you thought too small, not too big. Be like Jesus, the Buddha, and all the other spiritual giants, she says, who understood that clear vision and faith make light work of the apparently heavy world of matter.

Fear is 'sin' – it goes against nature, whereas faith is real, solid, and is the thing that Infinite Intelligence or God requires from us in return for delivering our wishes. Faith is what links you to the universe; it expands your cosmic footprint, while fear can only shrink you.

## **New Thought, New Life**

Many of Florence's ideas came from her involvement in the religious organization known as Unity.

Unity today describes itself as 'A worldwide Spiritual Movement dedicated to helping people discover and express their divine potential'. Although its teachings are mainly drawn from the Old and New Testaments, it holds that spiritual truth is too vast to be contained by any one religion or philosophy. It's a very practical, non-dogmatic form of Christianity whose focus is the application of universal moral law or 'infinite intelligence' to everyday life situations. What also sets it apart from mainstream Christian churches is the leading role that women have played in the organization.

Unity was begun by Kansas City couple Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in 1889. Myrtle endured chronic tuberculosis but believed she had been cured by the power of prayer and spiritual healing. The Fillmores were strongly influenced by philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy, and New Thought thinker Emma Curtis Hopkins. One of the organization's first publications was Emilie Cady's *Lessons In Truth* (1896), the bestselling bible of 'practical Christianity'.

Unity was part of the wider New Thought movement, whose philosophers included Prentice Mulford and William Walker Atkinson. Its ideas about positive thinking, the law of attraction, mental healing, and creative visualization

would come to have a huge impact on mainstream culture through the self-help literature. Motivational classics such as Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* are soaked in New Thought ideas, as are many contemporary spiritual bestsellers such as *The Secret*.

Florence would have read the key New Thought books. Her spiritual advisor was Richard Lynch, who had studied under the Fillmores, and who had founded the Manhattan branch of Unity that she attended. Although Florence never became a Unity minister, she spoke each week at its Manhattan services and also gave public lectures at venues such as Steinway Hall. A biographical note at the back of the 1938 edition of *The Game of Life* says:

She addresses the public at Unity-New York, 33 West 39th Street, every Sunday morning at 11 o'clock, Thursday evening at 8:15 and Friday afternoon at 2:30, giving treatments and interviews after the meetings, or by appointment.

As a divorced single woman with a Quaker background, it is easy to understand how Florence was attracted to this open-minded church and its powerful teachings. As she began her work as a spiritual coach for people in need, probably in the mid to late 1910s, Unity's metaphysical system fed her constant inspiration. At some point it would have occurred to her that she could make New Thought metaphysics come alive for a broader audience by expressing it through the stories of her clients.

She decided to write a book, but Florence's attempts to find a publisher for *The Game of Life and How to Play It* failed. Undaunted, she published it herself, and sold it through the bookshop of the Unity church. The brilliant title, its intriguing and inspiring content, plus public awareness of Florence through her speaking, made the book sell. That in turn led more people to seek her out in private practice.



Three years later, she followed it with *Your Word Is Your Wand* (1928). There was a long break in publication, then just before her death came *The Secret Door to Success* (1940), with more stories from her practice. We include it as a bonus in this Capstone Classics edition. Florence's followers also put together some of her notes after her death, publishing *The Power of the Spoken Word* in 1945.

## Legacy

The New Thought writer Emmet Fox, who was minister at New York's Divine Science church, gave this eulogy for Florence:

One secret of Shinn's success was that she was always herself ... colloquial, informal, friendly, and humorous. She never sought to be literary, conventional, or impressive. For this reason she appealed to thousands who would not have taken the spiritual message through more conservative and dignified forms, or have been willing to read ... at least in the beginning ... the standard metaphysical books.

Florence's down-to-earth writing style, her spiritual knowledge, and her deep compassion for her clients and readers created something timeless. She may not have expected that her books, with their old-fashioned turns of phrase and often quaint anecdotes from 1920s and 1930s America, would still be read today. The times may change, but people's fundamental concerns do not. Whatever the era, we seek to love and be loved, we desire good health, and we want material security for ourselves and our children.

At a low point in her life, author Louise Hay (*You Can Heal Your Life*) discovered Florence's writings at a Christian Science Reading Room in New York. They helped turn her

life around. The motivational writer Norman Vincent Peale (*The Power of Positive Thinking*) knew and enjoyed her work, as did Yolanda King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr.

Almost a century after the publication of *The Game of Life and How to Play It*, Florence's words still have the ability to move and inspire us. Having taught us how, we too have the power to 'speak the word' and live the life that was designed for us.