

Commentary: The Game of Life

- An excerpt from "Moments Not Years" by Michael H. Samuelson

Look at people and, at any given moment, you will see faces weighted down by turned pages. "If only I...", "I should have...", "Why did she...?" Consumed by a funhouse distortion of lost possibilities, they drag forward with wads of nostalgia bubblegum stuck to their shoes.

To escape the pain, they leap forward to the safe world of Someday. "Tomorrow, honest, tomorrow. Well, maybe the next day or, ummm, perhaps next week, but soon, I promise. Okay, it probably won't happen next week, but it will, someday...I promise." As the hours pass, they stall between disturbing memories of yesterday and Walter Mitty dreams staged in their personal version of Tomorrowland. As the calendar peels back, they are struck with a nagging sense that something is missing from their lives. That "something" is called Today. And each day is made up of moments, not years.

In my forty years as an educator and six-point-something decades of living, I have watched, facilitated, and played the game of Yesterday & Tomorrow. I now play the game of Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow.

Here's how both games are played.

YESTERDAY & TOMORROW

(No Children, Please)

First of all, there is an age requirement to play. As very small children, we are simply too focused on the moment to be any good at this game of past memories and future possibilities. Childishly (this is a good thing), we go about our days without regard for the past, without pinning our hopes on the future. We believe that our world, as presented, contains all that is necessary to meet our needs and make us happy. We simply use what is close at hand. When hungry, we put anything we can find into our mouth and spit out what we don't like. When bored, we entertain ourselves with our toes, our voice, crawling bugs, empty boxes, cold oatmeal, the cat's tail, or an imaginary friend. When angry, we throw things and scream until someone pays attention and fixes whatever needs fixing. When tired, we lie down and sleep. And when we gotta go—we go!

Of course, we begin serious training for the game of Yesterday & Tomorrow almost immediately. The world begins to direct our decisions: a disapproving look, the warmth and security of a hug, the gritty taste of dirt, a burned finger, the comfort of a smile, the discovery of a sweet tooth, an angry cat with claws. We remember.

Until the age of about three, we use instincts and limited memories to satisfy our quest for happiness. What amuses us? What makes us smile? What causes us pain? How do we get rid of this ache in our stomach? Guilt, regret, and finger wagging *couldas*, *wouldas*, and *shouldas* do not exist for us. Why? Because, for the most part, these emotions are the products of

socialization. They are lessons learned from life's book of expectations and acceptance, the latter being critically important and arguably, an integral part of life.

To follow this thought, let's put our child into the world of big people. Quickly, the rules of the game begin to unfold. Crying will work most of the time, but not all the time. We learn that different cries make different things happen. One is good for a hug, another gets our pants changed; one is good for a game of peek-a-boo, another brings food. If we let out a really loud one, the big people will do anything we want. A long, whimpering cry gets us our blanket, a stuffed animal, the dancing colors that make music above our crib, and our pacifier. Oh, and if we gurgle a lot and make singsong noises, the big people laugh and seem happy. If we giggle and laugh, they are putty in our hands! We are learning to communicate and manipulate our world.

For the most part, this world is pretty friendly and accommodating (yes, I know that for many children this is not the case, but that discussion is for another time). In this world, there is at least one person who seems to truly care about our needs and gives us a wonderful sense of ourselves; sometimes there are even two or more! We are clearly in control, or at least in high command. We have a fairly small, self-contained, protected world populated by our parent(s), relatives, playmates, and closely watched strangers.

As time goes by (ages 3–5), we learn more about how to get attention, how not to get attention, how to make people happy, and how to make people angry. We also learn how to feel bad ("I didn't mean it, Mommy"), sad ("Why did you hit me?"), envious ("I want one, too!"), possessive ("It's my toy!"), guilty ("I'm sorry"), embarrassed, ashamed, and repentant ("It was an accident; I just couldn't hold it any longer; I'll be better, honest").

We are lifted and soothed by memories of fun and play, but we're also beginning to replay the tapes of pain, frustration, fear, and doubt. And we're still not even in kindergarten!

The clock moves ahead. We are now in school. Because we were born with this amazing imagination, we sit at our desk, looking out the window, thinking about catching frogs, or fighting imaginary dragons, or playing with angels in the clouds. The pictures are vivid, the sounds are real, and the feelings are true. Then, all of a sudden, someone yells our name! It's our teacher, and she looks angry (we've learned what this look means)! Her forehead is all crinkly, her finger is pointing at us, she's leaning in our direction, and all the kids are looking at us. She's saying something about it not being recess and that we should pay attention. Now she's yelling, clapping her hands, saying that if we can't pay attention, we'll have to change our seat (whatever that means). We're not sure what we did, but it must have something to do with catching frogs, fighting dragons, and playing with angels.

So, do we stop using our imagination to create wonderful worlds and limitless possibilities? Not yet. The natural inclination to wonder and dream is still too strong to let go. But to us, newly released into an expanding world, there is clearly something wrong with what we were just doing. This teacher, who is so important in our life, has just yelled at us, and we feel really embarrassed! Well, we will just have to look right at her (that's what it means to "pay attention") and, at the same time, catch frogs, fight dragons, and play with angels. She'll never know.

Hey, we just got away with something!

Again, the child learns to manipulate her world to, in essence, become (or remain) happy. Clearly, though, childhood inclinations, desires, and dreams are not always consistent with society's expectations.

As a maturing child and young adult, we have learned that acceptance and gratification require sophisticated communication skills (perhaps "manipulation" is closer to the mark). Smiles and gurgles won't do the trick anymore. We must anticipate, react, change, adjust, modify, charm, evaluate, compromise, assert, pressure, negotiate, and concede in order to meet our needs. Okay, fine. If that's what it takes, we can do it!

Certainly, in a very real sense, all of the above are part of a recipe that may bring us a truly happy and fulfilling life. Mixed disproportionately and haphazardly, however, it is more likely to give us a shaky foundation of guilt, anxiety, confusion, projection, paranoia, wishful thinking, regret, and an adult world full of *couldas*, *wouldas*, and *shouldas*. This being the case, we now have a one-way ticket to the Land of Someday and sterling qualifications to play the game of Yesterday & Tomorrow.

Let the games begin! Now that we have qualified, we can move ahead with the game of Yesterday & Tomorrow.

Actually, the game is quite easy to play. All we have to do is focus on our mistakes while disregarding the nature of being human. At any given moment, should we slip and start to feel good about ourselves, we simply erase that feeling by remembering how inept, undeserving, hopeless, fat, ugly, undisciplined, and stupid we really are. That brings us back to where we belong, and fast! Of course, feeling like a loser can overwhelm even an all-star player, so we fast-forward to the day when we won't be so inept, undeserving, hopeless, fat, ugly, undisciplined, and stupid. Funny, though, the harder we run, the farther away that day seems. Of course, once we do start on the path to change, there comes that moment when we begin to feel good about ourselves, and we all know what that means.

YESTERDAY, TODAY & TOMORROW

(Players of All Ages Welcomed & Encouraged to Play!)

Memories of yesterday can be gentle and patient tutors that guide us today, while dreams allow us to set goals and rehearse the success of tomorrow. But, these are merely the bookends that outline reality. The living part of life occurs between the two dimensions of past and future. To use an old analogy, they are the grains of sand that pass through the hourglass. Or, more to the point, it is the dash on your tombstone that separates the year you were born from the year that you die.

In order to survive, the developing child needs to adapt, adjust, compromise, negotiate, and learn all the other subtleties of life. However, to thrive, she must also hold tightly to her

independence, spirit, imagination, zest for living, and respect for life's treasures. When she lets go or has these treasures ripped from her, the bookends gradually collapse until the essence of life, available only in the moment, is squeezed out, leaving the world of *couldas*, *wouldas*, *shouldas*, and *somedays*. Gone is the magic of the sunrise, muted are the sounds of laughter, screened are the faces of loved ones. Awe is replaced, at first, by skepticism, and finally, by cynicism.

Just for fun, let's not disturb the dust of yesterday, and let's put away the crystal ball filled with narcotic dreams of tomorrow. Simply open your eyes and look around. What do you see, feel, hear, and sense in your world? Where do you fit in? Not in the past and not in the future—right now, at this moment. This is where you live. Those other places are merely spun memories and looking-glass dreams.

I encourage you to re-capture the wonder of the child who lives in the moment and to run from the analytical adult whose days are filled with doubt and insecurity. Welcome to my world! Come; let's play.