

MOPS, MOMENTS & MIRRORS (Or "We're Off to Be the Wizard")

MOPS...

Just after my tenth birthday we moved to Bethesda, Maryland, near Washington, DC. This was one of the most difficult experiences of my life and caused a huge loss of self-esteem. I'd grown-up in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, where I'd had a very easy and successful life for my first nine years (including being president of my fourth-grade class!). What worked in this "Dick, Jane and Spot" suburb was to be a smart, cute and well mannered child. These traits made you popular and successful with friends, parents and teachers. The way you handled difficult situations, like bullies, was to say, "You better stop that or I'll tell your mommy!"

When I arrived in Bethesda, a suburb of Washington seemingly very like the suburb of St. Louis I had left, I soon encountered a shocking difference. For some reason the kids there were about two years older in terms of street-wise toughness and rebellion against authority. On the third day I was there, I was playing ping-pong with a new friend, Jobo, (who was nine) in his basement. Not long after we began, Jobo's older brother, Pete, and his friend, Tyson, (both 12 and a lot bigger than our 10 and 9) came down and began taunting us with those stringy, filthy mops that lived in 1940's cellars. The way they did this was to chase us around the ping-pong table sticking the mops in our faces. Well, I knew how to handle this situation. I stopped, pulled myself up to my full 4'6" and said, "You better stop that or I'll tell your mommy!" Well, they stopped all right, and then burst out laughing! They thought this was about the funniest thing they'd heard in a long time, and they shoved mops in my face for another two hours. That was the last time I ever used the "I'll tell your mommy!" strategy.

That began a terrible time for me that lasted five years. Following right on the heels of the mops, we moved into our new house right across the street from a boy my own age named Tommy. Tommy was everything I wanted to be. He was a good athlete, he was tough, he was attractive to girls. Tommy and I were the only kids our age within half a mile, and, whenever there were just two of us, Tommy treated me like his best friend. But when somebody cooler than me came along (like another friend from his school), there was about 90% chance that the two of them would delight in making me feel small and foolish. The next year I was dumb enough to

change to the same school Tommy went to (an expensive, snobby private school), so I could walk in his shadow all day long. Talk about asking for abuse....

First Kisses

When we were in seventh grade, Tommy got me my first blind date. Her name was Jane, and she was my first kiss. What should've been an occasion of celebration was just another opportunity for humiliation at the hands of Tommy. We were driving back from the afternoon movie where I'd had that wonderful first kiss, and Tommy and the two girls were sitting in the back seat of my mother's 1948 DeSoto while I was riding in front with my mother. (Talk about a non-cool place to be!) And then I heard Tommy turn to Jane and say, "Were you good to Bill?" I turned and saw her hold up two fingers and giggle. I wanted to disappear from the face of the earth at that moment, but all I could do was feel my face and ears turn bright red. It was about this time I had my first asthma attack.

Fortunately for my soul and psyche, my dad's work took us back to St. Louis in the fall of 1953, and I returned to school with my former friends. This, too, was an expensive private school but unlike the hell in Washington, it was coed. I'm convinced the feminine influence makes enormous difference. When I arrived there I immediately fit in with my old friends who treated me like a friend. That was sophomore year, and when it was over I was beginning to feel a little better about myself, but this confidence was very new and very fragile.

MOMENTS...

That summer my Mom and I made a trip back to Washington for a visit in her 1948 DeSoto coupe (which was not air-conditioned). When I'd left the year before, Tommy had been dating a girl named Ruth Craig (I use Ruth's last name because if she ever reads this I'd like her to be in touch with me so I tell her how thankful I am for her presence on this earth). When I arrived back in Bethesda, Tommy was gone for the summer, and Ruth and I somehow got together and actually became very romantically involved. It was lovely. The last night, while Ruth and I were sitting parked in front of her house and necking (as we used to call it in those days), she said to me, "I always wished you would take me out instead of Tommy."

"Thanks, I Needed That..."

Well, that was like a Gillette slap in the face -- and boy, did I need it! I just couldn't believe my ears! During all that time I thought there was no way I could ever compete with Tommy on any dimension, and here was this beautiful, young being saying she preferred me to Tommy. I've never forgotten that moment, and it's almost

fifty years later. Thank you, Ruth Craig, for giving me some of my lost self-esteem back!

Of course I didn't rebuild my self-esteem from that one incident, but Ruth's gift was a momentous trigger event. I hope you've had a number of those as well. We certainly all have enough moments of humiliation imprinted on our psyches, and it sure helps to have some to balance those.

I had another such moment when I was 24 and teaching in Chicago at a truly wonderful place called The Francis W. Parker School. I was there because Gadge Thomas had hired me after I'd taken a course from him the previous summer at Northwestern. He was not only my principal, but a mentor and father figure for me. Of course, as a brand-new, young-punk of a teacher, I was enthusiastic, insecure, and often obnoxious. One day when I was sitting in Gadge's office talking with him about something, he said to me, "You know, people in faculty meetings really listen to what you say."

Well, this blew my mind! I had no idea that those senior faculty paid any attention to what I said at all. It was like another Gillette slap in the face! I've never forgotten that moment either, even though it was 40 years ago. I much later realized Gadge was really telling me I was coming on too strong in faculty meetings, and he told me in a way I could hear rather than feel further put down. And he was right. When I thought back on those days, I realized I compensated for my insecurity by being articulately pushy and often a royal pain in the ass. His gift was to help me recognize a strength I really did have -- and to stop making it a liability by overusing it. Thank you, Gadge Thomas -- I will never forget you, either.

Those two moments have made an enormous difference in my life. They helped me know I was both acceptably attractive and reasonably intelligent, and in doing that, they allowed me not to be quite so consumed by my own ego needs. This allowed me to feel much better about myself, and that in turn allowed me to feel better about others. It seems to me self-esteem spirals upward or downward, and we certainly want to get our spirals going upward as much as we can.

Remember Your Moments to Become a "Giver of Moments"

The real point is that if you can remember these kinds of moments happening to you (and the difference they've made in your own life), you can then become a giver of those moments to others and make that kind of difference in their lives as well. This is just a very specific way to take Haley Joe Osment's advice in *"Pay It Forward,"* the wonderful movie that shows the power of putting out positive energy that multiplies in the world. Suppose each of us looked every day for one opportunity to reflect something true and wonderful back to one other person -- imagine the difference that would make on this planet!

MIRRORS...

I think this is mainly what my work in helping people see the potential of their Third Age lets me do. Just last week I was working with a marvelous group, and, in her opening introduction, a woman mentioned how much she was struggling with creating new life after finally getting out of marriage that had sledge-hammered her into the ground for forty years. She also said she was enormously concerned about her inability to take risks. My mouth almost dropped open! Here was a woman taking a great personal risk in disclosing the state of her life of group of strangers at the beginning of a three-day retreat. I saw that my job was to be a mirror for her, to reflect back to her she already was the risk taker she wanted to be. Creating her new life would be so much easier if she understood how much she already grown rather than believing she was the person of the last forty years. So I told her how I saw her, and she was amazed (just as amazed as I was when Gadge Thomas did the same for me). Over the three days others in the group confirmed regularly her openness to risk taking, and when she left I think she had a much more accurate and positive view of herself.

Maybe We're All Part-Time "Wizards of Oz"

That led me to see that huge part of my work (and perhaps a part of yours) is to be the Wizard of Oz when we're given the opportunity. Think about what the Wizard did:

1. He gave himself a front that made people think he knew things they didn't (when in fact he was just a pretty ordinary being);
2. Once people were ready to follow, he gave them tasks to do so that they could be who they already were;
3. After they'd done these things (and couldn't deny them), he'd help them see who they really were and give them something to help them remember (a heart, a diploma, a medal, etc.).

Let's talk about the Wizard of Oz as a model for being a mirror. Here is this not very special or attractive person (even a bit of a charlatan) who brings peace, prosperity and joy to the Land of Oz. How does he do this? Certainly his showmanship is central, but his greatest gift is to help people see they already are the dream they wish to be. He does this by learning what it is they want for themselves and think they don't have. He then gives them some nonsensical quest (like bringing back a witch's broom). The point of such quests is not the tangible objects brought back, but the experiences the adventures cause us to have. Notice these are not individual quests where there are no witnesses -- these are group quests where all can see

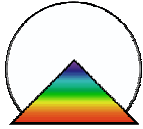
and affirm what who we each are and what we do. Then when it becomes time for us to claim from the "Wizard" the quality we're sure we've been lacking, all "The Great and Powerful Oz" has to do is give us a symbol of what we already have (the Scarecrow gets a diploma, the Lion gets a medal and the Tin Man gets a heart). Most important, Dorothy finds out she could always go home -- that from the moment of her arrival in this foreign land she's had on her very own feet the red slippers that would take her any time she wished. Of course, it's not the red slippers that matter. What matters is Dorothy now believes she can take herself home, and the red slippers support her new faith in herself.

A great teacher of mine often said:

"Faith is believing your Spirit knows the way when your ego doesn't."

This is what we're all rediscovering as we remember we are primarily beings of light and secondarily of matter. We're not limited to this "space suit" we call "body" or this "chip" we call "personality"; we are full participants in this wondrous universe and all its bounteous resources. So why don't you join me in one of my favorite little ditties I sing to myself when I remember who I truly am...

"I'm off to be the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz..."



Love, Father William