

Childish Games



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I’ve written before about some childhood pastimes that can get us into trouble when we play with them in the adult world. Bubbles. Marbles. And spitballs.

Bubbles are fun. They come in all shapes and sizes. They are beautiful, shimmering, and comforting – and distort the light that passes through them, the world we see, in magical ways. Many of us like to live inside them – preferring familiar voices, familiar perspectives, familiar people. But bubbles burst. They are flimsy, tenuous. And when they do, the shock, anger, and disorientation can be real.

I believe we need to have more difficult conversations with those who see things differently than we do and with whom we disagree.

Marbles are different. They are concrete, solid, and portable. You can play anywhere, with anyone, even by yourself. Yet we all know what happens when kids play with each other. They fight. They get upset. They decide they’re done with someone or something and move on – scooping up their marbles and going home, leaving others to stand around awkwardly, dejected, and hurt.

And then there’s the ever-popular pastime of shooting spitballs. We know exactly what those look like in grown-up form: potshots from the sidelines, anonymous criticism, drive-by commentary.

So – why am I writing about these diversions? Because, when these patterns play out in the adult world, they are not just diversions. They have consequences, often unintended and negative.

When people live in their bubbles, they see things through a more comfortable

yet distorted perspective that doesn’t give the whole picture. People in bubbles tend to view the world through a more narrow lens, focusing on and engaging with others who are like them, who agree with them. They shy away from diversity and disagreement, avoid healthy and constructive tension, and limit their perspectives. And when those bubbles burst – there’s hell to pay.

I have seen many adults walk away from groups, causes, or conversations the moment something feels uncomfortable or unfamiliar. In the nonprofit world, I have seen many adults take their marbles and walk, in the form of donations or support, when they come into contact with opinions or people who don’t confirm with their view of the world. That’s not healthy – for them or the organizations/causes they once supported.

And those who still shoot spitballs or take potshots from the sidelines? That doesn’t help anyone.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his work “Democracy in America,” saw voluntary associations and civic engagements as a hallmark of American democracy and one of the reasons this national experiment worked.

When people withdraw into bubbles,

take their marbles home, or shoot spitballs, those associations fray. Communities weaken. Democracy suffers. And our own lives become smaller.

I saw this recently when we hosted a community leadership roundtable with Senator Andy Kim. Senator Kim reached out to talk about antisemitism with our community and what could be done. We know there are several issues where there may be some daylight between the Senator and many in our community. Yet, I was surprised when several invited leaders declined to meet with the Senator because they disagreed. I was also disheartened to read some of the attacks, vitriol, and potshots in comments after the gathering which was, at the very least, a serious and constructive conversation.

I believe we need to have more difficult conversations with those who see things differently than we do and with whom we disagree. That’s the only way to delve into issues that matter, perhaps differently for different people, and to find points of commonality and collaboration.

So, as we take stock, wind down the summer, and think of the year ahead – maybe we should be playing fewer childish games? There are more than points at stake.