



ZEN AND THE ART OF HACKY SACK

BY LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN

A friend of mine recently gave me a hacky sack. She's been making them on a daily basis and is honing her playing skills as part of her process. Eye/hand coordination has never been a strong suit of mine, but the other day we spent about an hour kicking one of her crocheted creations back and forth. The basics of hacky sack are these: "The object of the game is to keep the sack off the ground for as long as possible. If every player gets a touch to the sack before it hits the ground, it is called a *hack*. If every player gets two touches before the sack hits the ground, it is called a *double-back* and so on and so forth."

It got me thinking about how we relate to one another. You can't be disconnected and expect to keep the ball in play. Interconnectedness depends on awareness of each other. But in a world in which social interaction consists of texts and tweets, it's become increasingly challenging to feel truly connected. Or has it?

Another friend of mine suggested I write an article about the random relationships that enrich our lives. She was struck by how brief exchanges with the mail lady and the UPS guy have the capacity to significantly improve her day. I know what she means. There are days when a smile directed to me by someone in the supermarket parking lot can unlock me in a way that feels both familiar and foreign. The smile that it brings to my face lingers long enough for me to pass it to the person behind them. *Double-back!*

There may be more of us than there ever was, but we still have the capacity to relate to each other on a level that breaks down the defenses of modern life. At a time when fear and anger are high, it's gratifying to know that human kindness is alive and well; that a brief exchange with a stranger can

change the course of a miserable day—for the better. Truly, the best way we have to fight random acts of violence is with intentional kindness. By rejecting the perception that the world is no longer a magical place, we make it better. Conversely, by buying into the idea that we are racing toward ruination, we make it so much harsher.

Spiritual teacher and author Eckhart Tolle says it much more eloquently: "When you no longer perceive the world as hostile, there is no more fear, and when there is no more fear, you think, speak and act differently. Love and compassion arise, and they affect the world. Even if you find yourself in a conflict situation, there is an outflow of peace into the polarities . . . This means, you often experience a collapse of the polarities . . . No person, no situation is made into an 'enemy.'"

Other tips for improving your game are the following: stay relaxed while kicking, practice regularly, set goals for yourself, don't bogart that bag, don't say "sorry" because everyone makes mistakes—especially while learning, and (my favorite) get used to ending up with a sack in weird places.

My mother put it much more succinctly: "It takes two to make an argument."

The most basic rule of hacky sack is to respect all other players. It's a good rule and one that applies to politics as well as it does to the playground. Other tips for improving your game are the following: stay relaxed while kicking, practice regularly, set goals for yourself, don't bogart that bag, don't say "sorry" because everyone makes mistakes—especially when learning, and (my favorite) get used to ending up with a sack in weird places.

Do you see where I'm going with this?

The etiquette guidelines and rules that apply to hacky sack can just as easily be applied to life. I'm guessing I'm not alone in feeling saddened by the lack of civility and kindness we currently extend to one another, so why not impose some new (old) rules and see if we can't get along better? Perhaps the best way to begin is by replacing social media with actual human interaction. Eye contact and conversation will forever trump the abbreviated alienation of tweets and twitters. And while we're at it, we should probably stop calling each other names.

On a recent appearance on the Commonwealth Club of California, Van Jones, author and CNN political contributor, very astutely pointed out that whenever his kids are overly confident about winning a game, they inevitably lose. And, afterwards, they systematically blame the other team: "The other team sucked, the referee cheated, the turf was messed up, Comey, the Russians . . ." Jones then proffered that, as a good parent, it's up to him to let them have their sour grapes moment on the car ride home, but quickly follow up with this essential question: "Was there anything we could have done differently?"

He went on to say that if we continue to call people names and disparage them for their divergent views, we are feeding what we're fighting.

"A beautiful resistance would be a revival, or renewal, of the commitment most of us came into the world with: that everybody counts, everybody matters, we all deserve a good life, and we're not going to leave anyone out."

Basically, if I heard him right, he was making the case for employing emotional intelligence, respect and compassion as the means of engaging one's opponents. It matters how we speak to each other.

"I don't think we've been having the

right conversation among ourselves. I think that we have invested too much confidence in the politics of outrage and accusation and confrontation."

While Jones was specifically addressing the current political divide between progressives and conservatives in our culture, the message applies to all of humanity. Only by practicing inclusion and intentional kindness, can we hope to function as a healthy whole. "We need each other. People are so lonely, they're so isolated, they're so scared, so freaked out . . . and your phone is not helping," he added.

When our dog Che passed away in September, we were saddened beyond words, but that didn't stop the world from turning and UPS from delivering. When Bob parked his truck at the end of the drive and strode up to the door with his usual broad smile, he handed me the customary two dog treats he's been leaving our dogs for the better part of twelve years. I could have just taken them and gone on with my day, but instead I told him that we would only be needing one treat from now on. Through a tearful exchange that included his sharing with me how he and his wife decided to cremate their beloved beagle so that they could continue to take her with them on road trips, we recognized in each other the willing and dangerously wonderful risk we humans take in loving. You simply can't convey that with an emoticon.

There is a contagious quality in kindness that makes it more powerful than cruelty. If humans witness an act of cruelty, they will almost always counter it with collective kindness and compassion. And while it's painful to be faced with cruelty and violence on an all-to-regular basis, I, for one, believe that how we choose to react to it can be our best defense against it. It's interesting that sexual predators and racists are suddenly being called out for their past trespasses against others, like rats fleeing a ship. Maybe it's consequence related to my favorite rule of hacky sack?

I refuse to live in a nostalgic haze that yearns for the past, laments the present, and fears the future. I think our future could be better than our past ever was, but so much depends on how we treat one another. So, I offer my small audience a challenge: stop texting and have a real conversation, smile at a stranger, and, most importantly, respect all other players.

Triple-back! ❄️

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