



*When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box*  
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# INTRODUCTION

Somebody a long time ago said that life is a game, and that is the main image behind this book. In using this image, I'm not saying that we should take our lives lightly. G. K. Chesterton once wrote that while we often take ourselves too seriously, we can hardly take our souls seriously enough. But life, like a game, is moving toward a goal. It has an object; it is not just a series of random activities. Furthermore, there are rules to follow in life, and each of us will develop a strategy. The game will not go on forever. As an ancient Italian proverb puts it, "Pawn and king alike, they all go back in the bag." An outcome is inevitable. (I am indebted to James Dobson for this image, from his book *Straight Talk to Men* [Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1984], 19–20.)

How to play the game of life is what this book is about. The instructions are listed in the table of contents. Though it is best to know and play by all the rules, each chapter—each principle of the game—can be appreciated on its own and applied to the game of life. So feel free to skip around.

One of the most widely read manuscripts in the Middle Ages was an allegory that compared life to a game of chess. The anonymous author wrote, "Wherefore play the game of life warily, for your opponent is full of subtlety, and take abundant thought over your moves, for the stake is your soul."

Have a good game.

# THE GAME



## CHAPTER 1

# LEARN RULE #1

This is our predicament.  
Over and over again, we lose sight of  
what is important and what isn't.

**EPICETUS**

My grandmother had just gotten out of jail.

She was a roll away from the yellow properties. And the yellow properties meant trouble. They were mine. And they had hotels. And Gram had no money. She had wanted to stay in jail longer to avoid landing on my property and having to cough up dough she did not have, but she rolled doubles, and that meant her bacon was going to get fried.

I was a ten-year-old sitting at the Monopoly table. I had it all—money and property, houses and hotels, Boardwalk and Park Place. I had been a loser at this game my whole life, but today was different, as I knew it would be. Today I was Donald Trump, Bill Gates, Ivan the Terrible. Today my grandmother was one roll of the dice away from ruin. And I was one roll of the dice away from the biggest lesson life has to teach: the absolute necessity of arranging our life around what matters in light of our mortality and eternity. It is a lesson that some of the smartest people in the world forget but that my grandmother was laser clear on.

For my grandmother taught me how to play the game. . . .

Golda Hall, my mother's mother, lived with us in the corner bedroom when I was growing up. She was a greathearted person. She was built soft and round, the way grandmothers were before they took up aerobics. She remains, at least in the memories of my boyhood, the

most purely fun person I have known. She let us stay up later than we were supposed to on Friday nights when our parents were gone. She peeled apples for us, told us ghost stories and scary old poems (“Little Orphan Annie came to our house to stay . . .”) that kept us awake for hours. She baked banana bread that was like having dessert for breakfast and made us red velvet cake—which consists mostly of butter—on our birthdays.

And she taught me how to play the game.

My grandmother was a game player, and she did not like to lose. She didn’t get mean or mad, but she still (to use an expression from her childhood world) had some snap in her girdle. It was part of her charm. Every Friday night as long as my grandfather was alive, the whole family, including spouses, would gather to play a card game called Rook; and if you were Gram’s partner, it was not wise to miss a trick or lose the bid. Everyone’s favorite old home movie featured Gram playing in a softball game at a family picnic in her younger days. She made contact with the ball and ran the bases with such singleness of purpose—a large woman coming at you like Bronco Nagurski—that no one got in her way. Home run. When she played Chinese checkers with small grandchildren, she was not one of those pushover grandmothers who would lose on purpose to make the grandchildren feel better about themselves. Gram believed before Max De Pree ever said it that a leader’s first task is to define reality. She was the leader, and the reality was that she played to win. Pouting and self-pity, two of my spiritual gifts, did not elicit sympathy from her, for even when she was playing, she kept an eye on what kind of person you were becoming. And my grandmother taught me how to play the game.

### **The Master of the Board**

Grandmother was at her feistiest when it came to Monopoly. Periodically leaders like General Patton or Attila the Hun develop a reputation for toughness. They were lapdogs next to her. Imagine that Vince

Lombardi had produced an offspring with Lady MacBeth, and you get some idea of the competitive streak that ran in my grandmother. She was a gentle and kind soul, but at the Monopoly table she would still take you to the cleaners.

When I got the initial \$1,500 from the banker to start the game, I always wanted to hang on to my money as long as possible. You never know what Chance card might turn up next. The board is a risky place. I am half Swedish (on my father's side), and Swedes are not high rollers.

*"Don't worry about it," my grandmother would say.  
"One day you'll learn to play the game."*

But my grandmother knew how to play the game. She understood that you don't win without risk, and she didn't play for second place. So she would spend every dollar she got. She would buy every piece of property she landed on. She would mortgage every piece of property she owned to the hilt in order to buy everything else.

She understood what I did not—that accumulating is the name of the game, that money is how you keep score, that the race goes to the swift. She played with skill, passion, and reckless abandon. Eventually, inevitably, she would become Master of the Board. When you're the Master of the Board, you own so much property that no one else can hurt you. When you're Master of the Board, you're in control. Other players regard you with fear and envy, shock and awe. From that point on, it's only a matter of time. She would watch me land on Boardwalk one time too many, hand over to her what was left of my money, and put my little race car marker away, all the time wondering why I had lost yet again. "Don't worry about it," she'd say. "One day you'll learn to play the game."

I hated it when she said that.

Then one year when I was ten, I spent a summer playing Monopoly every day with a kid named Steve who lived kitty-corner from me. Gradually it dawned on me that the only way to win this game was to make a total commitment to acquisition. No mercy. No fear. What my grandmother had been showing me for so long finally sank in.

By the fall, when we sat down to play, I was more ruthless than she was. My palms were sweaty. I would play without softness or caution. I was ready to bend the rules if I had to. Slowly, cunningly, I exposed the soft underbelly of my grandmother's vulnerability. Relentlessly, inexorably, I drove her off the board. (The game does strange things to you.)

I can still remember—it happened at Marvin Gardens.

I looked at my grandmother—this was the woman who had taught me how to play. She was an old lady by now. A widow. She had raised my mother. She loved my mother, as she loved me. And I took everything she had. I destroyed her financially and psychologically. I watched her give up her last dollar and quit in utter defeat.

It was the greatest moment of my life.

I had won. I was cleverer, and stronger, and more ruthless than anyone else at the table. I was Master of the Board.

But then my grandmother had one more thing to teach me. The greatest lesson comes at the end of the game. And here it is. In the words of James Dobson, who described this lesson from Monopoly in playing with his family many years ago: "*Now it all goes back in the box.*"

All those houses and hotels. All that property—Boardwalk and Park Place, the railroads and the utility companies. All those thousands of dollars. *When the game is over, it all goes back in the box.*

I didn't want it to go back in the box. I wanted to leave it out as a perpetual memorial to my skill at playing the game—to bronze it, perhaps, so others could admire my tenacity and success. I wanted the sense of power that goes with being Master of the Board to last forever. I wanted the thrill of winning to be my perpetual companion. I was so heady with victory after all these years that for a few moments I lost touch with reality. None of that stuff was mine—not really. Now, for a few moments, it was my turn to play the game. I could get all steamed up about it for a while and act as if the game were going to last forever. But it would not. Not for me. Not for you either. Plato

said that the entire task of philosophy can be summed up as *melete thanatou* — “mindfulness of death.”

I am a Christian, and I seek to write this book from the perspective of faith. I believe that you are a ceaseless being with an eternal destiny in the universe of an unimaginably good God. But you don't even have to believe in the Bible to understand the lesson of the box. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld put it like this:

To me, if life boils down to one significant thing, it's movement. To live is to keep moving. Unfortunately, this means that for the rest of our lives we're going to be looking for boxes.

When you're moving, your whole world is boxes. That's all you think about. “Boxes, where are the boxes?” You just wander down the street going in and out of stores, “Are there boxes here? Have you seen any boxes?” It's all you think about.

You could be at a funeral, everyone around you is mourning, crying, and you're looking at the casket. “That's a nice box. Does anybody know where that guy got that box? When he's done with it, you think I could get it? It's got some nice handles on it. My stereo would fit right in there.”

I mean that's what death is, really — the last big move of your life. The hearse is like the van, the pall bearers are your close friends, the only ones you could really ask to help you with a big move like that. And the casket is that great, perfect box you've been looking for your whole life.

## What Really Matters?

It's not bad to play the game. It's not bad to be really good at it. It's not bad to be Master of the Board. My grandmother taught me to play to win. But there are always more rungs to climb, more money to be made, more deals to pull off. And the danger is that we forget to ask what really matters. We race around the board with shallow relationships, frenzied schedules, preoccupied souls. Being smart or strong

does not protect you from this fate. In some ways, it makes the game more dangerous, for the temporary rewards you get from playing can lull you into pretending that the game will never end.

As a student in school, I may think that the game is won by getting better grades or making first string or getting elected class president. Then comes graduation and the pressure to win at my job, to get promoted, to have enough money to feel safe, and to be able to think of myself as successful. I pass somebody up and feel pleasure. Someone passes me, and I feel a stab of pain. Always I hear this inner voice: *Is it enough? Did I do good?* And sometimes if I'm quiet: *Does it mean anything?*

Then the chase is for financial security, a well-planned retirement in an active senior community where Botox and Grecian Formula

*Then one day it stops.  
For you, the game is over.  
Did you play wisely?*

and ginko biloba and Lipitor and Viagra bring chemically induced temporary immortality.

Then one day it stops. Other people keep going. Somewhere on the board, somebody is just getting started. But for you, the game is over. Did you play wisely? We all want God, Anne Lamott writes, but left to our own devices, we seek all the worldly things—possessions, money, looks, and power—because we think they will bring us fulfillment. “But this turns out to be a joke, because they are just props, and when we check out of this life, we have to give them all back to the great prop master in the sky. They’re just on loan. They’re not ours.” They all go back in the box.

### Live Differently – Starting Now

Human beings are the only creatures whose frontal lobes are so developed that they know that the game will end. This is our glory, our curse, our warning, and our opportunity. In Jerusalem, hundreds of synagogues have been built by Jews from around the world. One was built by a group from Budapest, and according to an ancient custom,

they had a coffin built into the wall. There is no body in it, they explain to visitors; it is present as a silent witness to remind us that it all goes back in the box.

The Talmud teaches that every person should fully repent one day before his death. When a visitor asked, “But how will I know when that day is?” he was told: “Treat every day as if it were the day before your last.” Arrange your life around what matters most. Starting today. The box will wait.

This is how my grandmother taught me to play the game of my life, and I talk about that in the pages that follow. My grandmother led, in many ways, a pretty simple life. She never went to high school, never led a company, never wrote a book, never traveled the world. She met her lifelong sweetheart in the eighth grade, her last year of formal education. She gave birth to three sons named—I’m not making this up—Hack, Jack, and Mac (the names Huey, Dewey, and Louie already having been taken by Donald Duck’s nephews), and then three girls, including my mother. She never moved outside the state where she was born. The only paid job she ever had that I know of was working behind the counter in a little Swedish bakery.

She was content with her life because she believed she knew what mattered. She had a clear understanding about what she thought was temporal and what was eternal. Everybody has to decide what he or she believes constitutes winning and losing in life. One of the smartest men who ever lived told one of his most unforgettable stories about exactly that decision. That’s for the next chapter. But I have had a long time to think about it.

My grandmother taught me how to play the game.