

Here's a bit of my story. You might just see some of your own story echoed in it, too.



All of my life, I've felt like a displaced person. It wasn't because we moved around a lot. My family relocated once, when I was 13, to a home about 15 minutes away from where I'd spent my elementary school years. It wasn't because there were disrupted relationships at the core of my life. There weren't.



However, home didn't always feel like a safe place. The only other place during my childhood that might have served as a refuge might have been school, but Mr. Slovowsky's gym class and the team games on the playground amped those homeless feelings in my soul.

This is because I was a smart, bookish nerd-girl who was always the second-to-last one picked for all team sports. As an adult, I'm amazed at how many people I meet that tell me that they were the last ones picked in gym class while they were growing up. It seems like there's many of us who've suffered the indignity of waiting for someone to tell us that we could be on their team.

That eternal wait watching everyone except Ellen Friedman get chosen before me for every team ever assembled at Mark Twain Elementary School telegraphed me a loud, painful message: Hey Loser! You don't belong!

Mr. Slovowsky, the sadistic gym teacher of my childhood nightmares, didn't do much to help the situation. Even his name – Slovowsky – conjures a picture of a tattooed drill sergeant making scrawny recruits do one-armed pushups to the 60's song "Go You Chicken Fat, Go" in the pouring rain, wearing a twisted grin on his war-scarred face.

It would probably be fair to mention at this point that my childhood memories might not be entirely accurate on this subject. Hindsight and life experience tell me today that Mr. Slovowsky just may have been an aging former jock who ended up with a Phys Ed teaching degree by default, not desire.

One thing was certain – Mr. Slovowsky wasn't much for lesson planning. It seemed like we spent at least 3 or 4 solid months each year in P.E. doing nothing but playing

Bombardment. Bombardment, also known as Dodgeball, seemed to define my place in the world.

The Mark Twain Elementary School version of Bombardment wasn't the formal affair depicted in the scatological 2004 Ben Stiller movie *Dodgeball*. Instead, our low-tech, high-torture version would begin when Mr. Slovowsky would pick his 2 pets to be team captains and let them loose on the rest of us so they could choose their teams. For me, it meant sitting on the dusty gym floor and waiting...and waiting...and waiting until someone was forced to pick me.

Draft accomplished, he'd send each team to one end of the gym and tell us to face the other team, each side lined up like a firing squad. Which, of course, was exactly what we were.

Mr. Slovowsky then proceeded to toss a few hard red rubber playground balls into the middle of the gym and blow his whistle, signaling that the carnage could begin. He'd then settle his middle-aged girth on a rusting metal folding chair and watch dispassionately as the brave kids ran out, grabbed the balls that rolled onto their side of the gym, and then proceeded to throw the balls as hard as they could at the kids who were lined up against the opposite wall. The balls would then be fired back across the room as fast as possible.

If you got hit by one of those red rubber missiles, you had to go and sit on the floor next to Mr. Slovowsky's folding chair. The idea was that the weak would be quickly picked off, and the strong would survive. It seemed like about once a week, someone had to go to the nurse because they had a bloody nose or a broken wrist from all this physical education. I read not long ago that many school districts have banned this game, for obvious reasons.

But back in Mr. Slovowsky's day, we were all trapped in that gym. There was no school district trying to protect us from the terrors of Bombardment. There was just Mr. Slovowsky and his chair and his whistle keeping an eye on things.

The odd thing was that I always ended up as one of the last kids standing on the firing line. It wasn't because of my natural grace and athleticism. It was because I hated pain. I hated the angry red welt that came along with getting whacked with one of those rock-hard playground balls. So I learned to hide behind the kids who cannoned those balls as if their lives depended on it, probably because in some weird way, their lives did.

A lot of kids seemed to thrive on this sort of testosterone-based competition. My aversion to Bombardment

ended up making me oddly successful at it. My strategy was to try to tuck myself in a corner. If that didn't work, I'd run klutzily from one spot along the wall to another, hiding behind the kids who were actually firing those balls at each other. When there were no more kids to hide behind, I ended up getting clobbered. Hard.

Bombardment summed up for me the way the world seemed to work. The strong and wily survive; the klutzy, the homely, the Losers get clobbered and have to sit on the filthy gym floor next to Mr. Slovowsky's rusty metal chair, watching, watching.



Pretty much all of my life had the feel of a Bombardment game that went on 24/7. As I approached adolescence, I figured out, like many teens do, how to dig a bunker for myself and try to find a safe place to hide from the rest of the Bombardment-playing world. I constructed my hiding place out of reefer and promiscuity and alcohol. It didn't take me too long to figure out that my hiding place wasn't any safer than the outside world. I'd Bombarded myself.

When a friend started visiting me in my self-constructed bunker and talking to me about Jesus, I thought she was whacked. It seems that she'd just "become a Christian", whatever that meant. In my secular Jewish head, if a person wasn't Jewish by heritage, then they were probably Christians unless their family came from some other corner of the globe. I believed that most Americans were Christians.

She encouraged me to read the Bible, which seemed patently absurd to me. Everyone knew the Bible was a nothing more than a disorganized but moderately interesting classic book of fiction.

She kept telling me that her book wasn't fiction, but Truth. Even weirder, she insisted that I needed to check out the New Testament. Why on earth would a secular Jewish girl like me touch that Gentile book?

It wasn't her compelling theology that made her words begin to soften my Bombardment-weary heart. Nor was it her skillfully constructed apologetic defense of her faith, because mostly, she just talked about whatever she was reading in the Bible with me and didn't freak out when I asked questions or said strange things. Her radically changed life wasn't much of a heart-softener for me, either. For a span of time after she "became a Christian",

she continued to join me in my emotional bunker and smoke weed while we talked about God. (This particular evangelism technique certainly wouldn't be taught in any Sunday School class, that's for sure.)

I wrestled my way through much of the Old Testament, which was somewhat more familiar to me, during those months. I didn't understand a whole lot of what I was reading, but there was a love and a power that made the words seem to jump off of the pages. It was like the Author of those words was there, speaking them to me. Me! The klutz. The loser. The one who didn't believe. The second-to-the-last-to-be-picked-for-Bombardment.

Why would He do that?

When I cried out, weary from no small amount of spiritual pain, asking God to explain why a not-so-nice Jewish girl like me needed to come to terms with who Jesus was and is, He found me, cowering in my bunker of substance abuse and promiscuity and despair.

He had every right to pelt me with lots and lots of angry red playground balls. Instead, He held me close enough so that I could hear His heart beating. He wanted to love me, and show me what His Father was like.

"Try reading the gospel of John," my friend patiently encouraged. "The answers to your questions are there."

When I did, I was stunned at Jesus' words about Himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:6 NIV)

In that moment of eternal clarity, His arms around me, I was safe for the first time in my life.

And when I looked closely at those arms, I saw them covered with angry red welts in the shape of those terrible playground balls.

While recovering from opium addiction during the late 1800's, struggling believer and poet Francis Thompson penned these words in his most famous work, *The Hound Of Heaven*:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,*

*Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me'.*

There are many of us who run, looking for a place to hide, hoping we won't be discovered or hurt. Like the pearl merchant in the parable, "with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy" Jesus searches out each one of us in our hiding places. He is completely certain that you are the most beautiful pearl there is, and He was willing to sacrifice everything to have you.



Excerpt from *Parablelife: Learning to live the stories Jesus told in real time* (FaithWalk/CSS, 2005), available from Amazon.com

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