

**THE BLOG**

# Happy Birthday to Me

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By Marty Kaplan

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Not long ago, a guy I know, a good guy who to all outward appearances seems happy and successful, replied to a birthday e-mail I sent him at work — “go home and blow out some candles” — with this:

“I’m 40-f\*ing-8, give me a break. They tell me that’s close to 50, but I refuse to believe it.” (Only he didn’t leave any letters out of “f\*ing.”)

I wrote back: “you’ve got your hair, a flat stomach, and a wife. i’d say life is good.”

To which he replied: “At 20 you won’t settle for less than several million, two best-sellers and a house in Majorca. At 48, what you said sounds really good.”

Expectations are strange things. When we’re kids, and when we’re parents of kids, we have no compunction about shooting for the stars. Every child is encouraged to believe that becoming a Michael Phelps or a Golda Meir, or however your tribe fills in the blank, is within the realm of possibility. Commencement addresses are universally about holding fast to your dreams.

But nevertheless, somewhere along the line we’re supposed to learn that the secret to happiness is adjusting our expectations to reality. Maturity means accepting that failing to get the gold or the Golda isn’t the same thing as failure. The good life is to be found in wanting what you have.

To be sure, the self-help sections of bookstores are filled with inspirational messages and 10-point-plans to the contrary. If only we visualize what we want, if only we believe in ourselves, if only we buy this book, then love and riches, fame and health, six-packs and serenity will be ours, no matter how far along in the life cycle we are.

But by and large, despite those enticing pitches, adulthood turns out to mean acceptance — of how you played the hand you were dealt, of mortality, of fate — even if it sometimes includes flashes of 40-f\*ing-8-like fury at the way the

world turns out to work.

I wonder whether that rage would be mitigated if, instead of everyone being brought up to think we could be president, we were raised to believe, as Buddhists are, that desire is the source of suffering. I wonder if the gross domestic product would really shrivel, or the upward mobility of classes would stall, or the amount of art and justice in the world would decline, if we grew up already knowing how things more often than not turn out to be — if we understood early on the unreliability of the meritocracy, and the odds against our dreams, and the huge role in life of dumb luck — if the rough passage signaled in the cry of “40-f\*ing-8” were not something kept hidden from kids, like the true identity of the tooth fairy, the mutability of beauty, or the lifelong wrestling with the meaning of existence that lies ahead of them.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, child psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim explains that the purpose of fairy tales is to give children an arena — a proxy world — in which to come to grips with evil, to come to terms with loss, to train their emotions for the inevitable struggles and disappointments of life. Anyone who has read the cruel original fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm will recognize the sense of this. But anyone who knows these stories only from their Disney versions will recognize how diligently we now go out of our way to insulate kids from the disturbing stuff that Bettelheim says is good for them.

Yes, I know that Bambi’s mother is killed, and plenty of other modern classics include scary separations from parents. The murder of Harry Potter’s parents by Lord Voldemort is of course the setup for the series. But (spoiler alert) no one in those seven volumes is forced to reconcile with the whole panoply of less lethal but no-less-soul-crushing disappointments — being downsized, pink-slipped, passed over, left — of which many, maybe most, lives are partly constructed. We are all broken vessels.

Recently I found myself reading the Wikipedia entry about me, an article that — in the way of wikis — I hadn’t written, nor did I know from whose keyboard(s) it had sprung. Someone — someone I went to Union High School with, in New Jersey, I’d guess — had included this line: “In his high school yearbook, Marty said that his ambition was ‘To win the Nobel Prize.’” Seeing that, I cringed, and — in the way of wikis — without a moment’s hesitation, I cut the sentence out.

Thinking about that excision, from the vantage point of my own birthday today, I wonder what made me rush to scrub my old ambition from the record. Was it too embarrassing that, at 16, I had such an aggrandized vision of my future? (My reading of Irving Wallace’s novel, “The Prize,” in ninth grade doubtless had something to do with my equating a trip to Stockholm with the highest anyone can aim.) Or was it rather too humiliating that, today, I had fallen short of what I set out to do?

Like another friend, who told me on his 86th birthday that he had “a stomachfull of gratitude,” I am deeply appreciative of what I have and achingly conscious of its fragility. But there is no house in Majorca, nor a Nobel on the mantle. I can’t conceive of urging any children to settle for the moon, when they can have the stars. I just wish there were some way to immunize them against their future feelings about 40-f\*ing-8, just in case the White House, or Bill Gates’ billions, don’t come along.

(A version of this ran in the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, where I’m a columnist. If you want to see what else is going on over there, here’s a link to their homepage.)

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