



## Why Some of Us Grow Old and Refuse to Grow Up Mitchell Milch, LCSW

"I Won't Grow Up," the signature anthem for the musical *Peter Pan*, is likewise the anthem of those who disavow the ticking clock. For argument's sake, let's consider for a moment that the emotional realities of these folks are suspended in times long gone or, alternately, they are frequent fliers to earlier developmental destinations. I'm referring to these destinations as domains of "never-never land".

We might call "never-never land" a kind of utopia, a perfect imaginary place. "If you're Peter Pan.....'never-never land' is a special place where childhood could last forever."(dictionary.com)

"Never-never land" is a more densely populated locale than one might ever imagine, though its coordinates are impossible to plot on lines of latitude and longitude. I speak with authority as I hailed from "never-never land" into my fourth decade of life. The residents here reach the age of consent, and then some, while relentlessly expressing their authority to protest the societal norms that require that they grow up. Instead of living life on life's terms and making the best of their unjust pasts, they allow these legacies to cloud their eyes with wishful illusions and fearful distortions. They are only ready to end their protests and take ownership of their lots under the twin guarantees that growing up be easy and that they be protected from failing while playing catch up to master the developmental milestones ahead of them.

We all contend with pockets of immaturity, self-states we manage as if children or else, like children, these self-states "manage us." If we mindlessly fail to restrain, redirect and groom our egocentric, grandiose, and impulsive aims, they will in renegade fashion jeopardize our health and welfare in the present. Members of this ilk may not be easy to identify as some are deft concealers of their shameful proclivities and guilty pleasures. Others employ their intelligence to rationalize their regressed stances. At one end of the spectrum are the proverbial "train wrecks," the riverboat gamblers who typically make life-altering, if not life-ending, wagers. They are the older equivalents of children who run out into the streets expecting their idealized parents to scoop them up out of harm's way.

Some examples are folks with addictive disorders who would rather die than delay their immediate gratifications and opt to learn healthier, safer and more socially acceptable forms of gratification. Others at the opposite end of the spectrum are risk averse. They abdicate authority

to others to make decisions for them, as if others are more capable of being masters of their ships than they are. Adults who present as strangers to self-doubt, confusion, weaknesses and vulnerabilities are pursued to fill the role of surrogate parents.

What they all have in common is that they are still operating in the emotional backyards of their early caregivers. They cling to what were once in their families of origin adaptive scripts, schemas and belief systems. Now in their current relational contexts these scripts etc. are self-defeating if not self-destructive.

Well meaning others observe their suffering and may not immediately catch on that these once childhood victims of neglect and abuse have not moved beyond alternating identifications with caregivers and their younger selves. A dead giveaway that this is the case is when all the help one can conceivably offer them is met with responses such as "I can't...", "I don't know what or how...", or "I need more help with....." All of these phrases are code for "I want you to do it for me," They won't assume responsibility unless it is easy, that they know in advance what to expect on their journeys, and that they will be protected from the frustrations and disappointments that go with the territory of muscle building adversity. In the treatment room where I hang out quite a bit each week, such patients may be indomitable in their demands that I be perfect, or perfect them before we get on with the growth work we are ostensibly there to accomplish.

If we design systems and organizations that play to their strengths the citizens of "never-never land" may indeed excel. What is important to realize is that they dread clashing with expectations of them learned early on because they fear re-living nightmares that are the psychological equivalents of Humpty Dumpty falling off the wall, and going to pieces forever. To suffer from early trauma is to be amnesic, without memories of falling apart and then when stress abates to find one's self intact again. It is beyond the pale for many of these folks to voluntarily court such flashbacks in the service of mastering the past. To leave the past behind they must learn the trust of a trained ally to hold both of them together as they enter such turbulent time tunnels to reinterpret, tame, and integrate these dissociated flashbacks as memories.

Many of us suffer "traumatic frustrations and disappointments" during our childhoods, to coin a term authored by Dr, Martha Stark in her book titled: "Working With Resistance." If we do not mourn our losses and forgive ourselves and our caregivers for having failed us, we may spend our entire lives lost in time warps searching for the parents we desperately want, are too late to find, and in a twist of tragic irony, in truth are no longer needed. Peter Pan, who is not gender specific, may spend an entire lifetime re-living such dramas without mastering them.

So you will not be surprised to consider that the married residents of "never-never land" are statistical anomalies in an era when divorce rates have risen like the depths of the warming oceans. These married folks seldom if ever leave their spouses no matter how miserable they are with their status quos. They can't live happily with each other but to live without each other is considered a fate worse than death. Their complementary needs to act out obsolete scripts that perpetuate desires to operate on automatic pilot, make for powerful resistance to accepting their

disappointments. They refuse to own their choices to be exactly where they are and want to be, all options considered, locked in marital stalemates.

These parties endlessly take turns blaming each other for what is wrong with their marriages. The gratifying silver lining is the imagined potential for the blameworthy spouse to be omnipotent, as if by magic to transform marital misery into marital bliss. Often they do their best to avoid conflict because they fight like cats and dogs when either fails to move mountains and walk on water. The blameworthy spouse becomes the object of the other's wellspring of unconscious vengeful rage meant, in truth, for some disappointing parent of yore who miserably failed younger versions of themselves. No matter how bad it gets between them neither party walks away. They will retreat or otherwise check out until they cannot remember how reality once again was a recurrent storm that decimated their wishful dreams.

The citizens of "never-never land" only apply for exit visas when they mourn their losses as lost desires and not survival threatening needs. They must accept that what they got or didn't get was all that was to be had under the guidance of their primary attachment figures. Given the willingness to take to heart and value what was provided, while committed to strengthening this infrastructure of functionality, they can run with their reinterpreted narratives to successfully master life's problems and pursue their most cherished goals. As Dorothy Gale of Kansas learned on her fantastic journey, we have it in us with assistance from wizards, good witches, psychotherapists, etc. to be the parents to the many sides of us we have longed for.

Another way to put this, as a former analyst of mine once did, "We all must learn to strap our babies on the backs of our motorcycles, reassure them that we will take care of their needs better than they were cared for previously, and head out on the highways of life."