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## **Sandlot Days**

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Scott, a friend of mine, recently completed his doctoral dissertation about ways in which middle-aged people use metaphor to help shed light on their self-understanding. For example, the individual who has spent years exploring the range of religious experiences and who has come to think of herself as a pilgrim. Or the executive who manages a large staff of diversely talented people who imagines himself a symphony conductor. A deeper exploration of these metaphors can help to increase awareness of and appreciation for the values, activities, and dimensions of life each metaphor reflects. I had a small role in this research as I helped my friend locate middle-aged adults to interview and also to read three versions of the dissertation as an editor. Scott and I also shared several enjoyable evenings over dinner discussing ideas raised by his research.

An important income of these dialogues has been to pose the same question to myself that Scott asked his research subjects: Is there a core metaphor that helps me to understand the current meaning(s) of my own life? While I have considered numerous possibilities, one continues to come to mind and, in fact, seems to best describe values and ideals that I began to learn in my youth and, now that I am in my "high middle years," have come to embrace dearly. That metaphor, rooted in my childhood experience of play, is sandlot baseball.

As I gaze back nearly fifty years into my childhood, the myriad meanings of sandlot baseball reflect back to me:

- The game, as I experienced it with my boyhood friends in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was characterized by improvisation. We altered our play according to circumstances that presented themselves (e.g., the number of children who showed up on a given day determined whether we would play on the entire sandlot field using all defensive positions or use only a portion of the field). However, no matter how creatively we adapted our play we always honored certain long-established baseball traditions and rules—three strikes make an out and three outs make an inning.
- Time spent on our sandlot field, located only 100-150 yards from our homes was mostly about having fun and enjoying long summer days in good company.
- The game was played using simple, inexpensive tools—ball, bat, glove. The boys in our neighborhood who regularly participated in our sandlot summers were from working-class families and would not have been able to afford more expensive pastimes.
- On the ball field we frequently exercised imagination. Some days Mickey Mantle, Ted Williams, and Willie Mays graced our outfield. Other days we boys, who

ranged in age from eight to eleven, were the Boston Red Sox playing the Chicago Cubs in the seventh game of the World Series.

- Sharing was important. Most days our play would have abruptly ended had we not pooled our few wooden bats (they break), balls (they tear and sometimes get lost in the woods), and gloves (not everybody owned his own).
- We seldom played to win. Competition was far down our list of priorities behind cooperation, extending the play as long as possible, and the sheer enjoyment of hitting, throwing, and catching a baseball. In fact, unlike Little League Baseball, which most of us played at night during the spring, during most of our sandlot games we did not even keep score.
- A democratic spirit prevailed. Players themselves decided strike from ball, fair from foul, safe from out. We chose our own teams and length of games. Power lay in the group.
- We played every day, even in the rain.

# Sandlot

*E. Michael Brady*



# Days

- Each child who came to the sandlot was welcome. If you showed up you played. Therefore everyone, the good and the mediocre athlete, had his chance to get the big hit or make the great catch.
  - Our skills developed as the season progressed. We hit, threw, and caught better in August than in April.
  - While on occasion we kids were given pointers by willing fathers and uncles, mostly we developed skills through peer coaching. Older children showed younger ones how to bunt and go back on outfield flies. But our best teacher was experience. During the summer months when we did not have school, we played all day until our moms called us home for supper. And on the longest days of June and July, many of us returned to the sandlot in the early evening and played until it was too dark to see.
  - By playing baseball so many innings and games and seasons, we came to know the tidal rhythms of running and standing, exertion and rest, movement and stillness.
  - Over the years we grew in our sense of belonging to our sandlot and to each other. It was a place of our own—our field, our neighborhood, our home.
  - Our sandlot baseball days were, in the end, about relationships, our love for playing our favorite game, and feeling both joy and gratitude for the many hours in which we found ourselves on a green field among kin and friends under a bright sun and blue sky.
- Yes, I believe the metaphor works. Even now life is not much more than this for me. Nor less.