

Delayed Gratification



For the first time ever, I tried my hand at growing tomatoes this summer. Well, it was actually only one tomato plant, the cherry variety, and the only reason I did it was that a friend ended up with more plants than she could handle. Other than the occasional herb, this was my initial foray into growing something edible. When the little orbs first appeared, I was very excited, not just to have succeeded in growing something but also by the anticipation of getting to eat it.

I was so excited, in fact, that after the first two turned red, were plucked, and eaten, I found myself unable to wait for the others to ripen so would pluck and eat them while they were still green. I'd occasionally encourage myself to let at least a *few* of them get red before eating them, and my intentions were always good, but I simply haven't been able to stick to it.

It's like the famous marshmallow test, an experiment conducted in 1972 by psychologist Walter Mischel of Stanford University, where children were sat down at a table with one marshmallow in front of them. They were told that they could eat that one marshmallow now OR if they waited for the adult to return (which ended up being about 15 minutes), they would be rewarded with *two* marshmallows. According to the Internet, of the 600 children who participated, 67% failed (failure defined as eating the one marshmallow). Even those who didn't fail struggled, often having to cover their eyes, or put the marshmallow somewhere out of view (some even kicked their table, and a few girls were documented as tugging at their pigtails). Interestingly, these children and their behaviors and life choices were then followed and documented for decades, and the results seem to indicate that those who had been able to resist that one marshmallow tended to do better on measures of health and success later in life. In other words, the ability to delay gratification was critical for success in life.

Well, shit ...

It reminds me of a personal experience back when I was 20. I spent that summer on Martha's Vineyard nannying for my cousin. They lived in a house with an impressive view of the water and my first night there, I ran to get my 35 mm camera when I saw that the sunset was going to be spectacular. My cousin's husband suggested I wait. "It's only going to get better."

"Yeah? But look at it NOW," I exclaimed as I snapped the camera.

Sure enough, a couple of minutes later, it WAS better. I aimed the camera again and ... again ... heard his suggestion to be patient, "It's only going to get better." I clicked the shutter anyway.

Guess what? A few minutes later, the sight was taking my breath away. He repeated his advice but how could I NOT take a picture NOW?? So I again snapped a shot.

I think I took a total of five or six pictures of that sunset, each one, indeed, more spectacular than the last. And remember, this was back before digital photography when each shot literally cost money as the roll of film only had so much room on it. "Wasting film" was a reality, and one I normally was very conscious of, but not that night. The final picture was, of course, the best and the only one I really needed, but I had been too impulsive, wanting that "one marshmallow" *now*.

We hear a lot about digital media shortening our attention spans, same-day delivery services encouraging impatience, even the old trope of millennials all getting a trophy for merely showing up so not even needing to exert effort of any kind to be rewarded. But my behaviors all pre-date those more modern cultural influences!

I recently binge-watched (another manifestation of instant gratification!) *1883*, a mini-series about the Dutton family's move out west that eventually landed them (literally) in Montana at what would become the Yellowstone ranch and homestead. This was a L-O-N-G, arduous journey that took months and resulted in many deaths. It's like the bit by comedian Louis C.K. (who, despite his poor judgement, can be quite insightful and funny) talking about how it took SO LONG for people back then to travel cross country by covered wagon that you were a completely different group at the end of the trip than you had been at the start due to deaths, births, add-ons, and defections. These days, you jump on an airplane, watch a movie, make a trip or two to the bathroom, eat a snack and you're there. No doubt, we're quite spoiled.

I've often thought that I would never want to go back in time to those kinds of life circumstances. I couldn't even begin to imagine life before modern-day conveniences (but *1883* gives some pretty good clues. No thank you!). That said, there probably is some wisdom in recapturing a slower pace where, sometimes, gratification is better, more appreciated, when it's delayed.

AND ... sometimes it's just fun to eat a delicious green cherry tomato (especially when the alternative is tugging at my pigtails)!