

# LOSING YOUR MARBLES

*I want to be all used up when I die.*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

**W**e don't know if you ever played marbles when you were a kid. But as little boys growing up on the prairies, playing marbles was a great pastime. It was fun, competitive, and, in a way, it helped to subconsciously shape our adult lives. We don't see the game being played much anymore. This simple, inexpensive game seems to have been replaced by expensive, fancy electronic ones, often encouraging time alone with very little human interaction.

For those of you who don't know the fabulous game of marbles, there are actually a number of different games to play. Here is one version: Any number of kids prepare the "game board" by digging four coffee cup-sized holes in the dirt at the corners of an imaginary square, with a fifth hole in the middle of the square. Each kid takes out a marble from a coveted bag of marbles and starts at the first hole that has been agreed upon by

the group. After deciding who will go first, players cradle the marble in their first finger, held in place by the thumb, ready to “flick” the marble toward the first hole. The kids take turns “knuckling down” to shoot their marble at the next hole, or at someone else’s marble. What skill, technique, and eyeballing of the lay of the land went into those shots! We became eagle-eyed hunters, scanning the game board for any slight dips or humps in the dusty ground, a tiny pebble, or a dry leaf that might deflect our marble from its target.

*Figure 1.1*



If you are fortunate enough to get your marble into the hole, you keep flicking to the next hole. If you are able to hit an opponent’s marble lying in wait for its turn, you are able to place your marble up tight against the opponent’s marble, flicking it hard and, hopefully, sending it way off course. This does, of course, put your opponent in a disadvantaged position. However, if your “flick” misses, there’s a risk you could send your own marble flying off into no-man’s land. The one sinking his marble into all four corner holes wins the game by being the first to get into the final hole in the middle. Victory! And the reward: you get to keep all the marbles being used in the game by your friends. Sweet, sweet victory!

So where did we put our spoils from knuckling down? Yep—you guessed it—they went right into our old, worn marble bag. After the game, we would stand around, comparing our bags of marbles. How big was yours compared to your friends', sometimes smaller, sometimes bigger? Comparing prized marbles—the steelie, the cat's eye, the crystal, the albino. What a game!

Marbles was a high-risk game at that age and we were careful with which marbles we played. A lot of our marbles were very special (an unusual crystal, a small steelie, a bright solid colour). We carried them around in that marble bag, took them out to admire them, or showed them to our friends before, inevitably, we took a chance and knuckled down with that rare steelie or albino, with the risk that it could become part of someone else's prized collection.

And then ... we grew up. But funny how life has turned out to be an advanced version of marbles. At the risk of being too cynical, as a society, we run our whole lives trying to win at what is, at its core, a game of marbles: that promotion, starting a new business, being one of the top salespeople, measuring up, keeping up. Funny how the development of our competitive instincts as kids becomes such a powerful influence in our adult lives.

We subtly (or, sadly, not so subtly) compare marbles. How big is your bag of marbles (networth)? Check out my steelie (my expensive car). How about this rare cat's eye (my impressive house)? Have you seen my beautiful albino (my holiday property)? And many carry their "bag of marbles" around like medals on a war hero's chest.

We call these Treasure Marbles. We collect these marbles, sometimes earning them through our employment, sometimes by starting a business. And sometimes we do not even have to earn them. We inherit them, find ourselves in the right place at the right time with a lucky business deal, or even win a lottery.

We can collect, spend, trade, or give away Treasure Marbles as we

choose. This game of collecting and spending Treasure Marbles often consumes the majority of our adult lives. Thankfully, for most of us, the novelty of the Treasure Marble game will eventually wear off. We feel satisfied with our network and start to wonder about our *Lifeworth*.

*Lifeworth* is the time when some people have a sense of what is “enough” for material comforts, and are now deriving satisfaction more from personal involvements and experiences. The people who have found more value in *Lifeworth* rather than network are known for taking on challenges or risks and are giving back to the world in a significant, sustainable, and meaningful way. Not everyone will find the true wealth in *Lifeworth*—many, but not everyone.

We want to be perfectly clear on one point: it is not inherently wrong to collect Treasure Marbles. Network is a necessary and, for the most part, enjoyable part of our lives. We all need these marbles to sustain our lives and to meet our needs and wants. The amount we choose to collect varies greatly from person to person in all walks of life. What we are suggesting is that there is something beyond network, and that network can open up opportunities for *Lifeworth* experiences.

There are at least two other types of marbles in our bag besides Treasure Marbles. We can also find Talent Marbles and Time Marbles in our bags. Talent Marbles are ones we both collect and distribute at will. Talent might be something we are born with, perhaps a talent in the arts, music, sports, woodworking, or metalworking. It may be something that, although learned, comes easily to a person. The more we practice this talent, the better our skills become and the more Talent Marbles we are able to put in our bags.

Talent might also come through a career: being good with numbers, adept with surgical instruments, or talented at organizing and managing people. Talent can come in many different forms, and what one person is good at, another may not be. An engineer can design an upgrader for the oil sands.

An instrumentation technician can have an entire building or plant running through advanced software programs. Another person would not have a clue. One person might be brilliant with construction, while another can help people with addictions find their way back to a better life. Talent comes in many different packages. It's a gift that can be channelled into helping other people. Instead of just using their talents to gather more Treasure Marbles, some people channel their Talent Marbles for the betterment of other people's lives. They say, "Hey, I can help them find good water and develop that water system for their village," or, "I can help build that school for kids in a country that desperately needs them." "I can raise money and organize people for the shelter in my home town to help the less-fortunate." Giving away Talent Marbles runs to the core of our humanity.

Unlike Treasure and Talent Marbles, Time Marbles are not collected, just spent. When we are born into this world, we are given a defined, but unknown, number of Time Marbles. These marbles are placed in our bags at birth and every minute, every hour, every day, we must give up some of our Time Marbles. It is automatic and it can't be stopped. Our Time Marbles are never replenished, just spent. You can't collect, hoard, or trade Time Marbles. The only control we have on our Time Marbles is *how* they are used.

We would like you to remember this special number: 1,440. This is the number of minutes in each day of our lives. These are non-bankable minutes! How we use them is an important facet of our lives, but we can't save any minutes from this day to carry over to a future day. They just keep ticking away. We can't stop their steady flow out of our bags. There is a predetermined amount, a predetermined rate of depletion with a finite time period. Everyone's depletion rate is the same. We can decide how we want to spend or use our Time Marbles as we please. We just don't know how long it will take for the last Time Marble to drop out of our personal marble bag. We decide where these marbles will go and whom they will benefit. Spending our Time Marbles as we please with focused intention takes us to the root of

life. It's the basis of being on-purpose, goal-oriented, content, and fulfilled. This is where *Lifeworth* begins. People with fewer Treasure Marbles and perhaps fewer Talent Marbles can live as enriching a life as people who have more Treasure and Talent Marbles. Time is the common thread.

For mental clarity, we decided to add some colour to these marbles. Time Marbles are red, because, sooner or later in our lives, time takes on a sense of urgency. Treasure Marbles are green. It is not too difficult to connect the colour green to money. We chose blue for the Talent Marbles to represent growth and vitality (and it was the only remaining primary colour!).

We learn the value of marbles and the marble-collecting game at an early age. In the first half of our lives, we compete for Talent and Treasure Marbles. Usually, the Talent Marbles experience a net flow into our marble bag. We develop skills, recognize talents, and gain experience and education, each with specific uses or purposes. At this point, we are trying to survive the game of marbles by improving our Talent Marbles and collecting Treasure Marbles.

As we continue to compete for marbles and our collection becomes more valuable—more marbles, better marbles, hard-to-collect marbles—we begin to measure our self-worth by what we have accomplished. As our Talent and Treasure Marbles increase, part of our self-esteem and self-worth grows. This is the part of our self-esteem that requires recognition and approval from outside of ourselves, from those around us. This is sometimes referred to as external self-esteem. In varying degrees, it is an important part of who we are.

As we gaze upon our collection and see how many of each type of marble we have, there is another simple principle that affects our perception of our prized marble collection—the scarcity-abundance principle. It has an impact on almost every aspect of our lives.

The “scarcity” part of the principle assumes that there is only so much of a particular item or resource available. Whenever someone else gets

some of that item, it is assumed that there is potentially less for us, or anyone else, to share. As other people collect their marbles, we fear that there will be fewer marbles for us to collect. As people collect or view their marbles with the scarcity mentality, they can become much less willing to part with them or to share them.

The “abundance” part of the principle is exactly the opposite. Abundance assumes that there is always enough of something to go around. As other people collect their marbles, we are confident that there will still be more than enough marbles for ourselves and for others to collect. When someone else achieves a sales goal or experiences a new success, this does not diminish our opportunity to achieve our sales goal or successes. There is enough for everyone.

Scarcity and abundance are two ends of the same stick, with thousands of points in between. And here is the odd thing about this stick: each of us can choose where we are on the stick and how we view our world from this point. Does this have an impact on our bag of marbles? Big time! We can collect—and spend, lose, or give away—marbles from a scarcity mentality. We have to hurry up and collect and keep all we can for ourselves and for our family. This part of life is much more of a competition for resources, a competition for Talent and Treasure Marbles, and we may be less willing to give up very much. Think of the old T-shirt slogan: “He who dies with the most toys wins.” This perspective is generally reinforced as we go through the middle parts of our lives and careers.

The abundance view of our bag of marbles is quite different. We recognize when we have sufficient marbles to meet our current and future needs, and the needs of those important to us. Yes, collecting marbles is still important to us, but we are more willing to share what is in our bag, because we know we can always acquire more. This view is more of a collaborative point of view. We recognize that we can create larger impacts by being willing to share our marbles with others. The fact that others are also collecting their

marbles does not diminish our ability to collect the ones we need. Maybe the revised T-shirt motto could read: “He who shares the most toys wins.”

We have a choice of how we view our bag of marbles—through the scarcity lens, the abundance lens, or someplace in between. This has a direct effect on how we live our lives and how we relate to others. Neither end of the stick is inherently better than the other. As in any part of life, going to either extreme can result in unintended consequences. It is important for each of us to find our balance point on the stick for that point in our lives. We also need to understand that this balance point can shift, depending on our circumstances at any point in time.

There is a constantly shifting balance of each type of marble in our marble bags. The ratio of red ones to blue ones to green ones is continually changing. There is an imbalance of marbles in our bag as we begin life. All of our red Time Marbles are put into the bag from the start—this represents the time we have to live our lives until we die. When we first look into the bag, we see almost all red Time Marbles, a few blue Talent Marbles, and almost no green Treasure Marbles (other than maybe a few monetary gifts from grandparents, aunts, or uncles). This is what we start out with, and the net flow for Time Marbles is out of the bag. Each and every day, there is a stream of red marbles leaving our marble bag. We can't add more Time Marbles to the bag. In the beginning, our Treasure and Talent Marbles are very limited compared to our Time Marbles. In our pre-adult years, it seems quite easy to reach into our bag to find our Time Marbles; time seems to be an unlimited quantity. It is more difficult to find the Treasure or Talent Marbles in these early years. Every day, we spend Time Marbles effortlessly. Their abundance makes them easy to spend or lose in the marble game.

As we pursue our careers, raise our families, and explore our world through the middle years of our lives, we add more green and blue marbles to our bag. The ratio of red to green to blue begins to change. We may see similar numbers of red, blue, and green marbles. It might be difficult

to easily identify what we have more of. The marbles seem to arrive at a balance—barely enough Time Marbles, enough Talent Marbles for now, and enough Treasure Marbles to stay in our comfort zone. It is also a time when it might become a bit more difficult to quickly find our red Time Marbles. Ironically, these are also the years when we physically begin to feel the time crunch: getting kids to activities, meetings, work, personal activities, volunteer activities, etc.

At some point in each of our lives, this balance changes. We have enough Treasure Marbles to meet our current and future needs, and so we begin to examine how we use the rest of our marbles. We begin to recognize that Time Marbles are no longer the most-abundant marbles. The value of the marbles begins to shift ever so slightly, sometimes without our recognizing it. The Time Marbles become more valuable and we become less willing to use them wantonly. When we look into our bag, we see more and more green and blue marbles in comparison to the red marbles. At some point, we have these subconscious thoughts: “So what? What am I really here for? Why am I doing this? What is the purpose of all of the green marbles? What can I do with my blue and green marbles, before I run out of red marbles?”

Unfortunately, many of us unknowingly relinquish control and distribution of our Time Marbles. We get caught up in the busyness of life, which is not necessarily a bad thing. As society expects, we may marry, have children, start a career, or start a business. In short, we’re just getting a life, and, during this part of our lives, we do lose some degree of control over the spending of our Time Marbles.

Of course, we are happy with the time we have spent or are spending raising a family and developing a career or business. These are some of the good times, some of our best times, when great memories are created, lasting relationships are formed, and nest eggs are built. And, as life would have it, there will come a time when this part of our lives will fade and

become part of our past. We will look into life's rear-view mirror and smile at what has happened, remembering the good times and the not-so-good, growing from life's highs and lows.

Then our gaze will once again move away from the rear-view mirror. We will look forward in life to the next part of the journey, with renewed hope and vision. We'll wonder what the road ahead will hold for us. We'll continue to wonder, "How long until we get there?"—wherever *there* is. "How much further?"

Hopefully, the horizon holds excitement and wonder. And it is at this point that we start to wonder about the best way to spend the Time Marbles that are still slowly and continually leaving our marble bag. Every time we breathe in, every time we breathe out, a marble leaves our bag. "Were they well spent?" we will ask ourselves. "Did it make a difference in my life? Did it make a difference in the life of someone else?"

Oh, look, another marble just left our bag.

Then, we all come to the end of the game of life and are launched into overtime. And, right after we die, imagine our bags of marbles being lifted up and summarily dumped onto a well-polished concrete floor. Ever seen that with a real bag of marbles? It's wild! The marbles bounce and scatter all over the place and a sense of panic sets in: "I'm losing my marbles. Somebody else is going to get my marbles."

The same is true of our "life" marbles. Family, friends, government, creditors, and charities will all be going wild trying to get as many of our marbles as they can. Of course, it is only our Treasure Marbles they will be fighting over. Our Talent Marbles run out when we "run out," and one of our goals should be to use up all of our talents before this happens. And, obviously, the last of our Time Marbles has left our bag.

The feeding frenzy for our Treasure Marbles only lasts for a very short while, and all the marbles we have collected throughout our life are redistributed. In a snap of a finger and the last bounce of a marble, they're all

gone—they're now in someone else's bag. And the cycle continues, decade after decade, generation after generation. The game is as endless as time itself. And it is just that, a game.

So what's the message in all this? It's not that the real-life game of marbles we play is bad—not at all! But the fact is that it *is* just a game. What we do with our marbles is important. What difference can our marbles make in the lives of others, now and in overtime after we are gone? How we plan for the redistribution of our marbles is critical. It helps define our *Lifeworth*, rather than our networth.

No one can predict the future, but one thing is certain: we will all lose all of our marbles at the end of the game, and we will all leave a legacy of some type, whether intentional or not. A legacy is created not only while we're here but also after we're gone. Losing our marbles helps frame the fact that our life was well-lived, that someone will know decades after we are gone that we even spent time on Earth. The legacy we leave can have an impact several generations into the future. And the great thing is that we can choose to influence the type of legacy we leave. n

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## SO NOW WHAT?

**S**o far we have equated life with a bag of marbles that we collect, spend, lose, share, and prize over our lifetime. We have introduced you quite literally to three types of marbles in our lives: Time Marbles, Talent Marbles, and Treasure Marbles. You should now have a mental image of this colourful, well-worn bag of red, green, and blue marbles that is changing constantly over your lifetime.

So what does this really have to do with life? We feel that the bag of marbles is our currency for playing in the game of life. Marbles are important tools in meeting our needs, achieving our wants, and growing personally.

- What marbles are you currently collecting?
- How will you use your marbles?
- What can you do with the marbles in your marble bag to create your own life worth living as you may define it or to help others achieve theirs?
- If you looked into your marble bag right now, what colour would you see the most of?
- Which one of the three types of marbles is truly the most important to you? Why?

