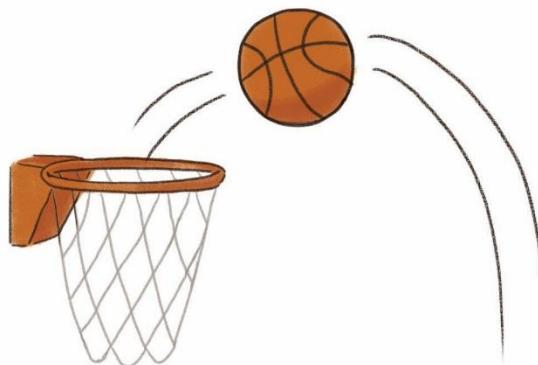




GROWING MATURITY: WHAT IS OUR PART?

A parallel with playing basketball

By Barbara Moon



Thanks

To all the Joy Group members who contributed to the cool analogies.

To my granddaughter, Brenna Moon for the great graphics!

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And to Dr. Jim Wilder without whom we would not have any of this great material.

Purpose

This little book can be an “elevator pitch” for introducing people to the idea of emotional maturity. We don’t have enough emphasis on growing these relational skills. Lifemodelworks.org and thrivetoday.org are full of resources.

Let’s spread the word via basketball!

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Introduction: Growing Emotional Maturity is Like Learning to Play Basketball

What in the world does emotional maturity have to do with learning to play a sport, you might ask. During an eight-week period of studying emotional maturity in my Joy Groups, we came up with a great analogy that helped everyone see what part we humans play in growing our maturity. Most all of us want to be more like Jesus every day. Most of us want to improve our relationships. Most of us need help understanding what God's part is and what our part is. Seeing an analogy of learning to play basketball was a path to that understanding.

For years my journey with Jesus was from the perspective of Him living His life through me. I heard warnings about self-effort. I was often confused about how all this worked. What's my part, if I have any? What's His part? Learning about the stages of emotional maturity and how God designed our brains to grow maturity finally cleared my confusion. I found what had been missing as brain science filled in the hole.

Our relationships and instant reactions are processed in the Right Hemisphere of the brain. The right brain functions non-verbally. It learns from models, examples, and faces that care. We become like those with whom we spend time. Reading a book about something is not the same as experiencing it. The left side of the brain functions verbally. The lectures, instructions, and words are just the information needed to get started. The right brain needs other people who can help us actually experience the information we take in.

One day I realized growing more like Christ was like learning a sport. I love to teach pre-school kids how to swim. I could show them on the side of the pool how to kick and dig and hold their breath, but if they never got into the water I could not say they were swimmers. Yes, they need the instructions but doing hard practice and participating in the sport are different than self-effort. Self-effort is trying to do things without listening to the coach and practicing what he says.



As I understood more about the relational side of the brain, I could see how Dr. Jim Wilder says that God has a part, and we have a part in growing our emotional maturity. God's part is salvation, healing, redemption, and deliverance. We cannot do any of those ourselves. They are the foundation; our dependence is total. We have to receive and co-operate with God. On the other hand, growing emotional maturity is not automatic and happens VERY slowly over a long time. God is involved as we follow Him, study the Bible, and rely on the Holy Spirit—but He does not snap His fingers and make us “better” or give us missing relational skills. We have to do our part. This is where the analogy of learning basketball comes in.

Why basketball, you might be wondering. Why not baseball or football? Baseball is a “slow” sport and football is one that most have not played. Basketball is fast and many of us have at least played in PE or at home. Being a fast sport reminds me that the relational side of our brains runs on a very fast track—faster than we can make a choice. The information on how to play a sport, lectures, logic, and words runs on the left side which functions on a slow track. Since our reactions are in the fast-track—and we have plenty of un-Christ-like reactions—growing maturity and relational skills will involve the fast-track. We will retrain the relational side with the needs and tasks we failed to get growing up. Slowly but surely the behavior will change and relationships with God, others, and even ourselves will improve. We will be more like Jesus.



In addition to learning the missed needs and skills, we will need some emotional healing from unresolved traumas along the way. There are many resources for finding healing with an inner healing model called the Immanuel Process.¹ We won’t look at that here for lack of time, but it’s important to know that these gaps we have in our maturity and the traumas we experienced growing up caused us to get stuck at a younger age. Healing gets us unstuck so we can grow again. Now we can better retrain those gaps. And—we have a part.

When I first began to use basketball as an analogy for teaching our part in maturity, I was mainly emphasizing the need for practice, practice, practice. Later I added how we need a coach even more. Then as a group we began to add more factors. So, let’s look at how learning to play basketball can help us see what our part is in becoming like Jesus.

¹ For more information see website www.kclehman.com and Share Immanuel Booklet, lifemodelworks.org



The Coach

We need a coach. Jesus is our main coach. Mentors, teachers, friends, family are also coaches. All effective coaches must know the sport inside and out. They must be approachable, enthusiastic, caring, and encouraging. It's vital for us players to listen to them and trust them. A coach needs to know how to help his players at the level in which they can function. Five-year-olds learning basketball can't play in the NBA. They barely can dribble, pass, or shoot, and usually congregate around the ball. A good coach usually teaches one skill at a time to the youngsters. A good coach is very patient.



Drill the Skills

The coach must drill the players with how the whole game works so that everyone understands, even if they might mess up some now and then. Slowly but surely all the aspects of the game will be internalized and become new habits. The brain will be trained in new skills and ways of behaving. The coach will know who to put in what position and when. Players will have to resist jealousy or comparing themselves.

The Equipment

The equipment is vital—A ball and a goal are the bare minimum unless we want to play a “real” game. Then we will need a court, a clock with a buzzer, and some referees. We can learn to shoot, dribble, guard, and pass in a driveway, but that won’t be like real life. Our Bibles and going to church are part of the equipment, but just reading and listening will not get us much practice. We need a team (community) to practice with. That “team” needs to be filled with authentic, teachable, committed members who all desire to “learn to play the game.”



From the Bible, church, podcasts, and other like sources we can learn the rules and how others have played, but the day comes where we have to play. Just reading a book about basketball will not make us players.



The Referees

Referees let us know when we break a rule, foul, travel, or get out of bounds. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are the Referees who blow the whistle when we lose our peace. (Colossians 3:15) They are fair and honest referees. The game will not go well or be satisfying if a referee is dishonest or allows players to cheat. As we grow



maturity, we give kind, healthy shame messages to each other when we get out of bounds or foul. It is important to learn how to both give them and receive them in order to remind us of who we are.



The Skills

Dr. Jim Wilder has given us our list of skills to learn in his five maturity stages: Infant, Child,



Adult, Parent, Elder.² These stages are our map for needed knowledge and understanding of the game and how to play it well. We should expect struggles and setbacks as we learn. Everyone drills and works together (community) to learn to dribble, pass, shoot, guard, and work strategies and plays. The game won't work if there is a "ball hog." Everyone has to learn to both give and receive.

The Bumps-A Contact Sport

Basketball is a contact sport; therefore, there will be bumps. The bumps can be both acceptable, fouls that require a penalty, or anywhere in between. Together we work through our relational bumps on a scale from either a quick, "I was wrong, will you forgive me?" all the way to a meeting with a third face that can help us find mutual satisfaction. The referee in basketball is our "third face" who helps keep the game stable and fair. In life we help each other see there is always a third choice.



The Opposition

Basketball has an opposing team. The other team is determined to win and will do all they can to achieve that goal. We have an enemy who does not want us to grow emotional maturity or relational skills. He will subtly attack and try to undermine all our efforts if we allow him to do so. Everything he does will be to destroy; every word he says will be a lie. We cannot allow him to win. We learn to recognize his lies and say, "Stop!" It's best to look to the Referee when the enemy fouls.

² For more information on the Maturity Stages see *Growing A More Human Community Volumes 1, 2, 3* By Dr. Jim Wilder, Amazon, or *Living From the Heart Jesus Gave You*, lifemodelworks.org or my book *Joy-Filled Relationships*, pages 6-34, Amazon



Show Up, Participate, and Practice

No one can learn to play a sport without showing up for practice and participating. Serious teams practice every day; sometimes with each other, other times at home. Likewise, we need



to show up for small group or church or other places we can learn how God wants us to be and live. The Holy Spirit will prompt us, but we have to listen and obey. During the week, a friend might remind us of a skill we are working on such as not engaging with anyone unless our Relational Circuits are on.³ Having them on during any interaction benefits the interaction. During practice, training happens. Running builds endurance. Skills are drilled over and over. Training the physical body is part of the game. In order to grow maturity, we have to re-train the Right Hemisphere of our brain.⁴ Showing up, repetition, and lots of practice are at the top of the list to learn a sport or grow maturity.

Others Who Affect the Outcome

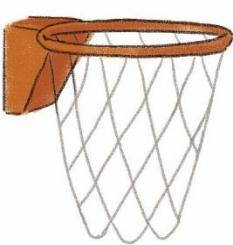
Let's not forget some other people on our team—recruiters, cheerleaders, those who don't get to play very often, and the crowd watching. Jesus wants us to share Him and bring others to Him. Cheerleaders are the people who encourage us, validate us, and keep us going when we are not playing so well.

Team members who sit on the bench most of the game are just as important as the stars. Their skills are in the making, and we treat them with respect and kindness. Some team members are not as enthusiastic about the game as we are, but we can include them as everyone can contribute. The crowd can make or break a game. How we grow maturity is affected by with whom we spend our time. Is my "crowd" pulling me away from Jesus or is my crowd growing in Christ and cheering me on? (Hebrews 12: 1 The Message)



The Real-Life Game

During all this hard work and practice that we are doing, we will have to prepare for a "real game." Will we be willing to mess up a pass or shot and keep going without beating up on ourselves? The game will add pressure that tests the skills we have been practicing. Practicing a skill in small group is not the same as encountering conflict at home and being able to remain calm and stay



³ For more information on right hemisphere relational circuits see *The Joy Switch* by Chris Coursey, thrivetoday.org, [amazon](http://amazon.com)

⁴ See *Joy-Filled Relationships*, pages 63-84 and *Rare Leadership* by Wilder and Warner for information on the brain science. [Amazon](http://Amazon.com) and lifemodelworks.org



relational. In “real life” we can notice the gaps in our maturity and where we need help to grow or get healing from past wounds.

Handling Winning and Losing

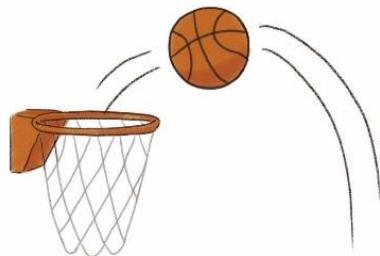
Playing a game reveals how we handle winning and/or losing. Maturity is a factor. Can I win without bragging and putting the other players down? Can I lose without blaming the referee or another teammate—or myself? The parallel here fits with



messing up and being willing to ask forgiveness or forgive myself. Gentleness towards weakness sets us apart when we are humble and kind to others who are not as mature as we are. Being kind to ourselves when we fail is important, too. We don’t want to quit the team because we struggle with a skill. We don’t want to quit growing maturity because the skills are hard and take a while. We persevere and do hard work.

Offense and Defense

Playing basketball involves learning both offense and defense. We briefly mentioned some of the necessary skills. Dribbling moves us down the court—the baby steps we see in our



growth. Passing takes the ball closer to the goal—we pass on what we are learning to family and friends who are interested. Shooting gives an opportunity to score—we notice that we did something different this time when conflict arose or someone hurt us. (Cheers for every score where we act more like Jesus!) Guarding is the defense. In the game, we don’t want the other team to score or get close to the goal. In life, the enemy does not want us to grow more like Jesus, spread the good news, or change our behavior. So, we defend our thoughts from his lies; we focus on our Coach and His Word.



Summary

Twelve brief parallels with growing maturity and playing basketball. There are many more I am certain. For now, if this short look at maturity sounds helpful, I encourage you to check out the websites below:

lifemodelworks.org

barbaramoonbooks.com

thrivetoday.org,

equippinghearts.com

kclehman.com deeperwalk.com

alivewell.org

Barbara Moon is an author, speaker, and small group leader in the Atlanta area.

*You can find her other books on her website at **barbaramoonbooks.com**.*



SCORE!