

REACHING FOR THE BRASS RING

By
Karl Sydor

Editor's Note: When Karl and I initially discussed this article he asked the question, "What does a story about reaching for the brass ring on a merry-go-round have to do with cruising and boating?" My response was, "How many people say 'if I had only ...' or 'I'm going to sail the Caribbean, next year' ... and never do it?"

This article is about focusing on your objective - knowing your dream and recognizing and seizing the opportunity when it presents itself.

What is it about merry-go-rounds that children love so much? As a child, I loved to ride them and probably was not unlike most children in that respect. For some reason, merry-go-rounds seem to have a mystical connection with children; I've spoken with adults who have great memories of merry-go-rounds from their childhood days. Have you ever had the opportunity to reach for a brass ring on a merry-go-round ride? Well, that's what this article is about.

Like most people, I've often heard the phrase "reaching for the brass ring," but I can't say I've thoroughly understood it. Frankly, I can't remember when I first heard it stated; I just know it was as an adult and I wasn't sure what it meant. My colleagues and I used it as a cliché in speaking about success in our businesses. However, it took on a personal meaning when I began to reflect on an experience I had as a child that helped me understand that the phrase is related to the brass ring on the merry-go-round.

Now, one may first ask what a story about a merry-go-round has to do with cruising and boating; I think that is a fair question, and my answer is that it depends on what your life-dream is or was. For me, it relates to my growing up on the New Jersey shore, my love for the ocean and its influence on my life. Boating aside, the merry-go-round described in this story actually was no more than a hundred feet off a New Jersey saltwater bay and alongside its shoreline boardwalk. The author hopes this qualifies it as a story that merits a place on this website and, possibly, awakens some similar memories the reader has experienced.

The story I am about to relate to you is true, although you may doubt it because it happened to me at such an early age. You may also doubt the details I give you, but because this made such an impression on me at that time, I have not been able to forget them. The details amaze me and I wonder how and why I remember the experience as clearly as I do. My only wish is that I had understood the lesson at that early age and had employed it consciously in my life. On the other hand, it's possible I have used the lesson without realizing it. The good news, for me, is that I now understand it and would like to give its deeper meaning to you and hope you will pass it on to a young person who may take advantage of its lesson for a more meaningful life.

When I was about ten years old, my parents owned a summer bungalow at the New Jersey shore. The town was Laurence Harbor; it is located on the shores of the Raritan Bay on the central coast of New Jersey. It was and still is a small town, but in its heyday (pre-1950) it

REACHING FOR THE BRASS RING

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was very popular as a summer resort. Laurence Harbor had all the amenities of the typical small Jersey shore resort town, i.e.- beach, a boardwalk, concession stands, a couple of taverns, a dance hall, hotdog and hamburger stands and rides for children including a merry-go-round. The summer of 1947 was especially important to me because I got to know several adults who operated the boardwalk and I was able to get little jobs helping them. It was paradise to me, and my memories of Laurence Harbor are wonderful.

That summer I got to know Old Joe Bentley who operated the merry-go-round. "Old Joe Bentley" is how everyone referred to him and I don't think he minded it. I don't really know how old Joe was; to me as a ten year old, he was very old. Joe wasn't a big man; he was round and stooped and did not get around easily. He was kind to me, however, and let me help him on the merry-go-round. I convinced Joe that I could get on and off the moving merry-go-round more easily than he, and that I could collect the tickets for him. Joe agreed, to my delight. Of course, as a result, I got to ride the merry-go-round (by far my favorite ride) as much as I wanted to, free of charge. How much better could life be for a ten year old?

There was a wooden pole, a little smaller in thickness than that of a normal telephone pole, planted firmly in the ground about a foot away from the side of the merry-go-round. The pole had a hook on its forward side, parallel with the merry-go-round's movement. The hook was located around the highest height of the merry-go-round's wooden horse's head as it moved up and down. On this hook were several brass rings. The trick was for a customer riding the merry-go-round to grab a brass ring and be rewarded with a free ride. To me, it didn't seem to be a very difficult thing to do and I couldn't understand why riders weren't grabbing a brass ring because it would give them the greatest reward I could think of...another ride on the merry-go-round. Although I was able to ride the merry-go-round free, while I worked for Joe, I decided I had to experiment at grabbing the brass ring to prove my theory.

Well, I found out that this was not an easy task. I mounted the wooden horse that was on the outer side of the merry-go-round's circular platform and after the merry-go-round got up to full speed I reached for the brass ring; I was too late, I had missed it. After a few tries this became very frustrating. The best skill God has given me has been the ability to analyze things; this ability has, frankly, been the basis of my life's work. Placing this skill into use at the age of ten, I continued to ride the merry-go-round to observe its movement in the approach to this pole and began to mentally break down the sequence of events in reaching for the ring to understand what was happening and why I continued to miss it.

I soon realized that because the hook was on the far side of the pole, the rings were not visible to me as we rounded the turn that approached the pole. By the time I caught sight of the rings it was too late and it took too long for my hand to reach out and grab the ring, thus, missing it. As I continued to ride the merry-go-round and observed the pole as I passed it, I came to the conclusion that I must somehow visualize in my head where the brass rings were on the other side of the pole before I reached them, even though I could not see them. I reasoned that my minds-eye would have to visualize the rings, as we approached the pole, and I would have to time my reaching for the brass ring as if I did actually see it. I continued to ride the merry-go-round executing this tactic on an

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experimental basis to see if I could touch the ring without taking it. It worked! Now I was ready to do the real thing.

By now Joe was wondering what I was up to and started reminding me that I had taken all the free rides he was about to give me. Being the persistent little person I was, I convinced Joe to give me a little extra time. This next ride would not be an experiment, but it would be the real thing. The merry-go-round started and gained full speed. I was on my favorite wooden silver horse. With the wind blowing in my hair as we turned the approach, I envisioned where the ring was on the other side of the pole. As we rounded the turn and approached the pole, I reached out and grabbed the brass ring. What a glorious feeling! I couldn't believe it; I had done it! Well, I wasn't about to leave it at that. I decided I would do this again to prove that this hadn't been just a stroke of luck. On the next pass, I had another brass ring...and another on the next pass. I also realized that once I saw the pole, I could close my eyes and still grab a ring because my mind was so prepared, it knew the timing without me having to actually see it. What a discovery!

Well, by now Joe had had enough with me, and it was definitely time for me to get off the merry-go-round. That was fine with me; I had successfully accomplished my goal of grabbing the brass ring! Later, I wanted to know that I could accomplish it anytime I desired. I waited for another day and upon convincing Joe to allow me to ride for free, I launched back into my experimental program of "reaching for the brass ring." I remember questioning myself as to whether I could do it again. It seemed to have taken so much effort and focus before, that I wondered if I was up to it. Well, here we go. The merry-go-round cranked up to speed and I began my mental preparation, but not as intensely as I had done the last time. As I approached the pole I reached out and could not believe it, I missed the ring. Doubt began entering my mind. Well, I had another chance as we rounded the curve, but reaching out, I missed it again. What had gone wrong? As the merry-go-round came to a halt, I sat mesmerized on my wooden steed. What was the problem?

Again, my analytical power went to work and I realized that I had lost confidence in my ability to grab the ring and allowed myself to be less focused in visualizing what I wanted to accomplish. I came to the conclusion that I had to mentally prepare myself better before the approach. Thank goodness that Joe had not gotten on my case yet about riding too much. The merry-go-round started to move once again and got up to full speed. I began preparing my mind and seeing in my minds-eye the ring on the other side of the pole. We approached the pole, but with doubt still in my mind, I missed it. Suddenly, I realized that the thing that was causing me the biggest problem was my self-doubt, so I made up my mind that I could really do this, and I would. Again, I started the mental visualization as we rounded the curve, but this time I did not allow doubt to enter into my mind; I convinced myself I would do it. Bang...it happened; I had the brass ring in my hand. Yes, I could do it if I prepared, as I knew I must and didn't allow doubt to confuse me.

By now, the intensity of all this had drained my ability to deal with it any longer. I felt I had accomplished what I set out to do and enough was enough. I got off the merry-go-round and made a commitment that I would no longer attempt to "reach for the brass ring" on this merry-go-round. I was emotionally and physically exhausted for a ten year old. Did I learn a

REACHING FOR THE BRASS RING

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lesson from this that I would take into life? I really can't tell you that I had enough insight to see how to apply it to my life. After all, I was only ten years old and my greatest joy was just playing and enjoying life. I really didn't understand life beyond that. At ten, life was a blur to me; many things happened that I just didn't understand. How then, was I able to cope with the challenge of grabbing the brass ring? I can't tell you, it just happened.

The thought I would like to pass on to the reader, especially if you are a young person, although anyone at any age can benefit from this is, 'Envision your dream, seek it out, prepare yourself, don't give up on it or yourself, and be ready to recognize and take hold of your dream-opportunity when it confronts you.' You must know what you want, as best as you can. You must visualize accomplishing it in your minds-eye and you must develop the self-confidence that you can do it. I won't try to tell you how to do that, that's something you must work on yourself, but I will tell you from experience that it does include commitment, self-discipline and lots of determination.

Yes, the story of "reaching for the brass ring" did start on a simple merry-go-round, but it has a deeper and more rewarding lesson to heed than most people realize, and it is the following. *You will never know when your dream-opportunity will present itself, but if you know what you want because you have visualized it, convinced yourself that you can do it, and prepared yourself for it, you will recognize the opportunity when it is facing you and not let it pass you by.* Many people have missed their dream-opportunity in life because they just have not recognized it, or were not ready for it, when it confronted them. Don't let that happen to you! That's what "reaching for the brass ring" really means!

Looking back on my life, I wish I had been able to make better use of those 'brass ring' lessons I learned on the merry-go-round. As I've matured, I've come to realize that a person should have a life-dream to fulfill. Many people will tell you that they don't know what they want in life, yet the people who have had significant accomplishments will tell you that they recognized what they wanted from an early age; I believe I can vouch for both.

As a teenager I spent a lot of time around the Raritan Bay waterfront swimming, fishing and having fun on my Dad's small boat. I remember becoming enthralled with the thought of being a captain of a ship and imagined myself being on ships that I would see on Raritan Bay as they went out to sea. I subscribed to Motor Boating & Sailing magazine, reading every issue cover-to-cover and reading any other magazine I could get on the subject. I read any novel I could find about sea stories. After high school graduation I took the test for the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, NY, and passed all requirements. I was about to be offered an appointment to the academy when I realized that my family was not as thrilled about it as I was. As a result, I turned down the appointment convincing myself that it just was not the right thing for me. I can tell you with all honesty that this decision ended a life-dream opportunity that never came to me again. I struggled in trying to find a new direction for a career. Fortunately, my God-given abilities did pull me through, and I have had a blest and relatively successful life. And maybe, just maybe, I did go on to subconsciously use those lessons I learned on the merry-go-round, for new career opportunities, just as any person can do in establishing a life-dream in their adult years.

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Yes, be prepared, not only to "reach for the brass ring opportunity," but to grab onto the opportunity and hold it close to your heart and mind, and seize the day to make your dreams come true.

Abraham Lincoln Quotation: "I will study and prepare myself, and someday my chance will come".