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INTRODUCTION

The recess bell rang, kids began screaming and running out onto the playground, and my dogs took off after them as if they were a scurry of squirrels. In a panic, I sprinted to catch up before there was trouble. Fortunately, there was a chain-link fence separating the dogs from the kids. Unfortunately, there was a teacher who headed our way with a very disapproving look on her face.

That sunny spring day, our two Scottish terriers and I had embarked on a new walking adventure. It was a path that surrounds a huge sports complex. On the outside are homes, a cornfield, and an elementary school. When we arrived, it was deserted and quiet. It appeared to be safe to allow Cosmo and Roxi off their leashes. They are in doggy heaven when they are running free. It makes me smile. I do leave their short leashes attached so I can catch them more quickly in

an emergency. Technically speaking, we comply with the posted park signs, “All Dogs Must be on Leashes.”

It never crossed my mind that we could be attacked at any moment by a pack of school kids. When that bell rang, I knew we were in big trouble. We, meaning me. *Bad dog owner, bad.* I grabbed the leashes just before they got to a group of girls yelling, “Puppies!” A teacher was in hot pursuit close behind with fear in her eyes. We quickly retreated away from the fence and onto the walking path. I gave her a knowing wave indicating, “Sorry, we are moving on.” She waved back with a relieved look of, “Thank you, and I’m so sorry, but you know we can’t trust anyone anymore.” To which I thought, “Yeah, isn’t it sad?”

Once we were a safe distance away, I stopped to observe what all those screaming kids were doing on that playground. Some were playing soccer, kickball, football, and basketball. Others were using the traditional equipment—swings, slides, monkey bars, rings, teeter-totters, and the *make me sick to my stomach* merry-go-round. Others played four-square, jump rope, hula-hoop, hopscotch, and gigantic tic-tac-toe. A few ran off to less-traveled areas of the grounds to hang out, talk, sing, dance, and chase butterflies.

I found myself smiling at their joy. I tried to recall the times in my life that I have felt that kind of joy. I remembered only about a dozen such moments since my playground days. They made me smile too. The smile quickly faded as I thought about how sad it was to have so few such joyful memories over so many years. Wow, how quickly we can go from joy to sadness in the confines of our own minds. Thankfully we have the power to change our mental state in an instant. I chose to return to smiling in happiness for those children and

the dogs as I let them go again. Yeah, I know. *No, no, bad human.*

By the end of the walk, I was convinced that we should all be able to experience the happiness we felt on the playground more frequently than we do. I had recaptured the feeling during that walk. I was completely relaxed and at peace with the world. Heaven on earth, I thought. I wondered if there were lessons we learned on the playground that could help us all create that feeling more often. There must be, there has to be.

As we headed home, I had one last thought. That playground is like heaven to those kids. Looking back, it was for me too. I wish I could feel like a kid again. *Playground Heaven: Feel Like a Kid Again.* That would be a nice book title. Nah, I've written my book of a lifetime. It was a lot of work. I'm supposed to be retired and enjoying the life of leisure I earned through all those working years, right? Let's go home and take a nap, puppies.

Too late, the cat was out of the bag. I had to figure out if there were in fact lessons we learned as kids on the playground that we could apply to our daily adult living to regain that Playground Heaven feeling. I couldn't stop thinking about it. There was no nap that afternoon, or sleep that night. The wheels were turning. If I could figure out what the lessons were, then I could apply them to my daily living, and so could you.

Amazingly, an outline for this book including all the lessons came to me by the morning. When something happens that fast you can be sure of two things: (1) it is divinely inspired, and (2) the one who inspired you expects you to do something about it. Yes, I believe in God and Heaven. I'm not going to talk about them much in this book, but I do believe.

As I headed out to the gym for a workout, I was excited to get started writing. I knew that if I actually followed the advice I was going to write about, I would be much happier in the future and so would many others. Of course, doubt crept in. *Someone else has probably already written this book. I'll check when I get home. Maybe I'll get lucky and spare myself some time and effort. I'll just read the other guys book.* I had completely talked myself out of writing in my short car ride. Way to go, Mr. Lazy.

I go to a gym that is class-driven since I can't seem to motivate myself to exercise regularly or vigorously on my own anymore. There are between fifty and one hundred participants in each hour-long class. Each session includes a combination of cardio and strength training. I like it because every workout is different, and they have full-time instructors who tell you what to do and ensure you are doing it in a way that provides the most benefit with the least chance of injury. They tell you what to do and you do it, simple. But it's not easy; the workouts are intense, thus their no joke name, Next Level Extreme Fitness (NLXF).

As I struggled through class that day, I realized I was feeling the same kind of emotion I had while watching the playground kids. Here we were, a bunch of adults running, jumping, lifting weights, and punching bags. Yet even with the physical stress involved, we were having a great time. I realized how fortunate I was to be with a group of energized people striving to be their healthiest selves every day, working hard individually and encouraging each other to do the same. Though we are physically exhausted by the end of each session, we walk out knowing we have pushed ourselves and each other to overcome the challenge of the day. It's a great feeling of community and accomplishment. It's a daily dose of Playground Heaven. This experience solidified

my thinking on the lessons that make that feeling possible. It also reinvigorated my enthusiasm to write.

The purpose of this book is to help you recall the lessons you learned during your playground days and to help you use them in your daily living. The goal will be to experience that Playground Heaven feeling far more frequently than you currently are, maybe even at will. You can recreate the environment and conditions that lead to that feeling at whatever station and stage of life you are in. Most likely, you will not need to make drastic life changes. Instead, you will be amazed that all you really need do is what you used to do as a child. Are you ready to be that kid again? I am. Let's go.

PART ONE

THE GOOD LIFE

THE BEST YEAR EVER!

I found heaven fifty years ago during my best year ever. It was in June 1968. I was nine years old, and I was going into the fourth grade. Our family moved from Iowa to Indiana. My dad took a year off from his job as a college professor to pursue his doctorate degree at Indiana University in Bloomington. His daily routine was to attend school, study, and write papers. My mom did all the rest, including typing up all his work on an actual typewriter. I don't think it was even electric. They were really busy.

We were a family of five living in a 1,000-square-foot, two-bedroom, high-rise apartment in the married student housing building. It was about ten stories tall with 200 apartments. I shared a bedroom with my younger sister and brother. We rotated beds monthly to give us each a chance to sleep on the top bunk. I still remember the address, 215 Tulip Tree House. I looked it up, and it still exists.

Imagine being a kid in an apartment building full of other like-minded kids. We were constantly looking for something fun to do while our parents were busy with schoolwork. There were spacious grassy areas on both sides of the crescent-moon shaped building. Our school, playground, and ball fields were across the street. The university campus was within biking distance, and we didn't have to cross any busy streets to get there. There was always someone around and something to do. Did I mention the minimal parental supervision? Heaven.

I think we only had three rules to follow: (1) be good at school, (2) go outside and play, and (3) be home by dark. We were free to do whatever we wanted as long as we didn't do something stupid. Once I got stuck buried up to my knees in a muddy field. We were trying to see how deep we could get and I won. Wait, I guess that was considered a loss? It felt like a win at the time. It was definitely considered stupid. Thanks for saving me, Mom and Dad.

It was my best year ever because I was free to be me and to play. We played baseball, football, scatterball, dodgeball, tetherball, hide and seek, and kick the can. We flew paper airplanes, kites, and shot off model rockets. We rode our bikes all over the place. We built ramps and jumped over things, including each other in the style of Evel Knievel. We played all day, every day—heaven.

I guess we did have to go to school too. But the fun was just a recess bell away. I ran out the first day with a couple of my apartment friends. We ended up in line at a game called tetherball. I had never played or even seen it before. It consisted of a metal pole cemented into the ground that seemed like it was ten feet high. It had a rope with one end attached to the top, and a volleyball attached to the other. The ball hung at about the eye level of a fourth-grader.

The game is meant for two players who stand on opposite sides of the pole. A line was dug in the dirt to signify sides. The opposing players hit the ball with their hands and fists in opposite directions. The game ends when one of them manages to wrap the rope and ball tightly around the pole. Got it? I wonder if this game is even allowed on playgrounds anymore. Rope burns were common; no pain, no gain.

We stood in line, waiting our turn. It was a “win to stay in” type game, which appealed to me. I thought I’d just win every time and recess would be awesome. I finally got my turn. My opponent hit the ball a couple of times, and it was over. I was a quick loser. I don’t think I even touched the ball. How embarrassing. But, since the cool kids seemed to like this game, I kept trying. I lost every time that first week, but at least it took longer to defeat me the more I played.

I biked over to the school that weekend and practiced tetherball for hours. I observed that if you punched down at the ball, it would go high over your opponents’ outstretched hands every time. I hit down to start, kept hitting down, tried to never miss the ball, and the rope would wind around the top of the pole quickly. (There are a few other tricks that I won’t share with you in case we ever play.) Anyway, I got pretty good after a weekend of practice. I was so excited to get to school on Monday.

Guess what? I finally won. And I just kept winning. I don’t remember ever losing again. However, I learned something new about games. If no one else ever wins, eventually no one wants to play anymore. The new cool game became kickball. I must admit it was more fun because everyone got to participate at the same time, no waiting. Suddenly, my brief tetherball career ended. In my mind, I’m still the reigning champ. You want to challenge me? I became a cool kid in the process,

something I had never been before, which gave me confidence—heaven.

I needed that confidence to make it onto a little league baseball team. I had only played softball in Iowa, and I wasn't very good. Everybody got to play in that league. In Indiana, you had to tryout to make a team and not everyone made it. But, even if you made it, that didn't mean you were going to get to play much. On the bright side, everyone got a fancy official uniform. I wanted one.

I still remember the tryout day clearly. A coach hit us fly balls and grounders. We stood in line and took turns fielding. He told us where to throw the ball as he hit it. "Take one," meant to throw it to first base. "Take two," meant to throw it to second base. "Bring it home," meant to throw it to the catcher. It was big pressure to catch and throw accurately to the right place. I learned what being nervous was that day. It was my first big chance to prove I belonged on a real baseball field. More importantly, I had a cool kid image to protect. And, I did it—I made the team—heaven.

All the teams were sponsored by local businesses. Our team name was Black Lumber. After a quick internet search, I found they still exist, fifty years later. As the season progressed, it was evident that I was the worst player on the worst team in the league. But, I was still cool because I had an official uniform. I was the backup right fielder—that's bad. When I was up to bat, the coaches encouraged me to "get small" and not swing. That's worse.

Our team ended the regular season with a record of three wins and eleven losses. Luckily, all teams got to participate in the playoffs, regardless of their record. Somehow, we won our first two games and went up against the best team next. We were behind by one run

and there were two outs. There was a runner on first, and I was up to bat. As I walked to the plate, I heard parents pleading with the coach to put in a substitute—I was a little on their side. The coach ignored them probably because there wasn't anyone else available. My parents weren't able to make that game. They weren't required to attend every game back then, which meant the other parents were lucky because my mom would have defended me. (Think a momma bear with her cubs).

I had been the last out many times. In that game, I decided that if I was going to be the last out again, at least I would go down swinging. I hit the first pitch down the third base line. I ran like crazy to beat the throw only to find out that the ball had rolled foul. My momentary excitement quickly faded. The first base coach said he had no doubt I was going to get a hit. He told me to swing away.

I ran back to the batter's box with a renewed sense of confidence. I hit the next pitch to third base again, ran even faster than the first time, and beat the throw—safe at first. The next two guys got hits, and we won the game. The encouragement from that coach produced the hit that gave me confidence which has been with me ever since. Thanks, Coach. It's amazing what a single moment in time can do for you—more heaven.

The other event I remember clearly was the first moon landing on July 20, 1969. We stayed up late and watched Neil Armstrong step onto the moon on our black and white TV. Do you remember what he said? "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." I've never forgotten those words, both for their significance in history and because that's the way I felt about my time at Tulip Tree House. It was a giant leap for me too. I came back to Iowa a year later as a new, more confident and talented me.

I played basketball and tennis in high school and placed third in the state tennis tournament as a senior. I went on to play college tennis, graduated with a degree in business and became a Certified Public Accountant (CPA). I also became a husband, a father, and eventually a grandfather. I held fancy work titles at a few large organizations for thirty-three years before retiring. I planned to play tennis, do some volunteer work, and play the drums in a rock cover band—rock n’ roll heaven. It was time to live the good life and then fade away. A dog walk changed all of that. I’m glad it did.

You might be thinking, “I thought you were going to tell me how to live the *Playground Heaven, Feel Like a Kid Again* life. Get on with it already.” I will, but my point is, I encourage you to take a trip down your memory lane. It will help you remember who you were, how you got here, and who you are now. This information will come in handy as we go along. Stick to the good times; it will help keep a smile on your face. We’ll talk about those other, rougher times later.

Here’s the deal. I learned a lot on the playground that taught me the lessons required to live a heavenly life here on earth. You learned from the same experiences. Unfortunately, I forgot them for about forty years. I’ll bet you have too. I finally rediscovered them in retirement. But, you don’t have to retire to use them. The forgotten years could have been so much better. I want you to learn from my mistakes. I will remind you of the lessons that will enable you to live a heavenly life daily. I urge you to use them and please, never lose them again.

I have had the good fortune of living a successful life, by worldly standards. However, something was missing for the majority of four decades—that Playground Heaven feeling of my best year ever. There was little joy in those four decades, only moments of temporary

happiness. In looking back, I can see the error of my ways. I have corrected them, and I am now experiencing that Playground Heaven feeling every day. You can too—really. This is my sole purpose for writing, to give you the keys to experiencing lasting happiness.

Thank you for your interest in what I am about to share with you. No matter what your stage in life, I know it will help. As your symbolic first base coach, I'm telling you right now that I have no doubt you will get a hit, many in fact. I'll throw you pitches right down the middle. You just have to swing away. Ready?

One more thing before we get started—I am far from perfect. I once heard it said that authors write the books they need to read. That's what this is. I'm learning right along with you. It took me an entire year to write this book because I researched and tried out everything I will share with you. I am determined to practice what I preach. It is working for me and I have no doubt it will work for you too.

First, let's examine what it takes to live the traditional version of the good life.

CHASING HEAVEN

Are you familiar with the time-honored formula to successfully achieving *the good life*? It goes back to at least the early 1900s. All of my life I have heard it and seen it lived out by all generations. It remains alive and well, continually reinforced through our schools and in the constant barrage of advertising. A formula that has persisted for over 100 years must be right ... right?

I've always equated seeking the good life with chasing heaven. By heaven, I don't mean the one you might think of up above with clouds and harps and angels. The heaven I am referring to are the little slices of heaven we can achieve here on earth. It is experiencing the best of what this world has to offer as often as possible.

To refresh your memory, here are the simple steps we are told will lead to achieving success and happiness:

- Go to school.
- Earn good grades.

- Find a great job.
- Work hard.
- Earn promotions and pay raises.
- Buy all the things and experiences you need and want.
- Save money and eventually retire into a life of leisure.

I wanted to include finding the love of your life, getting married, and having children as part of the standard formula. However, it seems these became optional in the last couple of decades. I'm not sure what happened, but I thought I should mention them. It seems there should be something about family and friends too. Oh well, let's go with the basics for now.

Follow the steps, and we are told our happiness is guaranteed. That's what we all want, right? We want to be happy. All of our daily activities are designed to make us feel good and happy, or at least not to feel too bad or unhappy. We do the things that make us happy, avoid or procrastinate the things that don't, and struggle through the rest as best as we can.

Think about it. What do you do in a typical day? You wake up—always a good start to any day. Maybe you say thanks for the opportunity of a new day. Perhaps you think about all of the things you are grateful for in your life. Maybe you just get up and get going without any thought. Or, do you hit the snooze for a little more sleep to put off facing the challenges of the upcoming day a bit longer?

What's next? Caffeine? Breakfast? A brief tour of all that stuff on your phone? Or do you avoid your phone because someone is probably already bugging you about one of those things you don't want to do? Maybe you are a spring-into-action type, anxious to make things

happen. Good for you. Or are you someone who finds countless ways to distract yourself from what you really should be doing?

Eventually, you head out the door to conquer the world along with everyone else. It's time to mix it up with all your worldly friends, to do whatever it is you do to make your way on this planet. Hopefully, you like it, or at least don't dread it.

Ideally, we spend our days working to improve ourselves and to provide a valuable service to others. That is how we earn a living. It is how we work toward securing the good life. It is how we chase heaven on earth.

I believe our purpose in life is to identify, develop, and use our talents to serve the needs of others to the best

**Our purpose in life is to use
our talents to serve the needs
of others.**

of our ability. What else is there? Wouldn't you be happy if you were fulfilling that purpose? It seems logical, yet challenging too—but who doesn't like a good challenge?

During your day, you face many opportunities and challenges. You make choices about what to do and what not to do. You take action to make good things happen and to prevent the bad. All the while, you are trying to make things better for yourself, or at least not worse. We spend our days trying to get what we want and to avoid what we don't. And to distract ourselves from any unpleasant, unavoidable realities.

We keep ourselves busy every minute of the day. E-mail and social media are useful in this regard. It's easy to get lost down those rabbit holes and still somehow feel that you are doing something worthwhile. Throughout our days, we swing from action to

distraction to inaction to reaction, ping-pong from one task to another like a pinball. It is exhausting.

After a full day of rushing around improving yourself and helping others, you arrive at home. Now what? Is it time to relax with dinner and maybe a walk? Is it time to work on your hobby or play with the kids? Maybe you play a sport or game, or exercise. There is always television and snacks, or reading. Soon, you call it a day and think, it's been one more good day in the good life.

Most of us enjoyed the good life as kids. We didn't expect much, and not much was expected of us. Our needs were few: shelter, food, water, and treats. We were like puppies—pay attention to us every once in a while, and make sure we don't get into too much trouble. Let us wander around and have fun all day long. That's it; simple.

As we age, more is expected, and we expect more in return. No more free ride. It began with chores, and an expectation we earn good grades in school. Our needs didn't change, but our wants sure did. Interacting with other people made us realize how little we had. We wanted more of what they had. But, we didn't just want the stuff everyone else had, we *needed* it because it felt like everyone else had more.

As your wants grew and your parents' patience and wallets grew thin, they suggested you get a job. You needed to learn the value of a dollar. You soon learned it took money to make money. Suddenly, you needed transportation, insurance, and gasoline. You got hungry doing all that work, so you needed food money too. Wow, life got complicated in a hurry.

Now you have your parents, teachers, and a boss telling you what to do. How did this happen? A few years ago, all you did was have fun. You decided you needed to get some fun back into your life, so you

signed up for school activities: sports, music, drama, various clubs—maybe all of the above. You wanted to be a well-rounded individual. You needed to build your resume so you could get into a good university.

Now your days consisted of school, activities, work, homework, and maybe a little sleep. Congratulations, you were swiftly becoming an adult. You occasionally wondered what happened to your childhood because it was gone in a flash. You complained a little. Is this what the rest of your life was going to be like? Adults told you to enjoy what you had because it was only going to get worse. No one said life was going to be easy, kid.

But you knew better. You were smarter than the dumb adults of yesteryear—you know, your parents. You would get a good education and a high paying job, then you would be free to do whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted to do it. You would have a big house, a cool car, and travel the world. Maybe you would get a motorcycle and a boat too. At some point, you may find the perfect spouse and have the perfect children—the good life.

You decided to go after it all. You got the college degree and a good job. You bought a car, rented a nice apartment, worked hard, and earned promotions. You met the spouse of your dreams, got married, bought the house, and had kids. You continued to work hard to earn more promotions and more money. You bought all the stuff you needed and wanted. You saved for the kids' college and your retirement. You continued to purchase the things the good life required. You took awesome family vacations. Life was indeed good—heaven.

The kids got through college and headed off on their own. They followed in your footsteps and made all the right life moves. Eventually, they blessed you with grandkids. Congratulations, you are truly living the dream. You followed the formula for living a happy

life and succeeded. You are living the good life, heaven on earth. Can you feel it? Are you loving it?

Here's the best part. After you have worked four or five decades, you get to retire and do all the things you couldn't do while you were working. In retirement, you can do whatever you want, whenever you want. You can live your "I'd rather be (*fill in the blank*)" bumper sticker dream. It's time to relax and enjoy a well-earned long vacation. It is truly heaven on earth.

The playground kid did it, and so can you. He went to school, got some good grades, a college degree, a good job, worked hard, and earned promotions. He got married and had kids, bought what his family needed, raised the kids, went on vacations, and coached his kids' sports. He found time to play tennis and the drums, was blessed with grandkids, and eventually retired. He achieved the good life. Of course, he also experienced his share of disappointment and heartache—that's real life.

We recently caught up with the playground kid and asked him for his thoughts on the last forty years. Here's what he had to say:

"The thing is, I rarely felt that the good life was all that good. I did everything I was supposed to do to be happy, yet I wasn't. I often wondered, 'Is this all there is?' I had everything I wanted. It was definitely more than I needed, yet something was missing. Something big."

I had found a little heaven on earth as a ten-year-old, but lost it a few years later. I finally rediscovered it recently. What happened in between? Life, I guess. No one said it would be easy. Someone once said to me, "Life will never be easy, but the good news is that it doesn't last very long." How depressing—sixty years gone in a flash. But, the good news is statistically, I will live another twenty years. I want to live those years on

the playground with that heavenly feeling. I want my playground life back.

I want to say that I have no regrets. It seems to be the thing you're supposed to say at my age. I guess that way you can put the past behind you and not hurt anyone's feelings. But I do have regrets, and so does everyone else. Shouldn't we admit that, thus allowing others to learn from ours? It seems selfish not to share our regrets with the next generation. Maybe it doesn't matter what we share because we are humans who seem to repeat the same dumb behaviors, generation after generation, going back to the beginning of time. How about we change that together?

The truth is, the formula for the good life is flawed. I regret knowing it was faulty before I followed it, and yet going along with it anyway. I clearly recall staring out our dining room window one evening as a high school senior knowing there had to be more to life. I knew it. I thought about it constantly but could not figure out what it was at that time. No one else seemed to have the answer either. In the end, I went along to get along.

While I've lived the worldly definition of the good life, I've rarely felt that Playground Heaven feeling. It's been elusive in spite of the great people I've been fortunate to have in my life. I have no regrets about any of them. My regret is knowing that there was a better way, but going with the flow anyway. My unhappiness was my fault alone. The good news is I finally figured it out. I'm living it now, better late than never. I'm happy to share it with anyone who will listen.

I'm going to ask you to suffer a little to help motivate you for what comes next. You can choose not to, but it's an important part of the transformation process of getting from where you are, to where you want to be. There is no physical pain involved, but maybe a little

mental anguish. It only lasts through the next chapter. You can do it. Afterward, mom will slap a Band-Aid on you and send you back out to play. Do we have a deal?

First, take a minute to write out your, “I’d rather be (*fill in the blank*)” bumper stickers. The blanks are those things you would rather be doing than what you are doing most of the time now. For instance, “I’d rather be playing tennis” or “I’d rather be helping someone live their Playground Heaven life.” I’ll be doing that for you very soon. Write “I’d rather be” at the top of a sheet of paper. List anything that crosses your mind in the next few minutes, and keep your list handy for later use. It’s time to board the pain train briefly. Seriously, it will be useful and over quickly.

