

## MUSICAL CHAIRS

Some time ago, I came to the conclusion that life is a game of musical chairs. I remember musical chairs as a party game where chairs are arranged in a line, with chairs alternating, facing in opposite directions, or in two lines, back to back. Sometimes, chairs are in a circle, facing out. In any case, there is always one chair less than the number of players who stand around them, waiting for the music to start and the game to begin. Thus, the name musical chairs. The music is either recorded, or played live, usually a piano. The music starts, and everybody begins marching around the chairs. The music suddenly stops, and the players rush to grab a seat.

What does the game of musical chairs teach us? Instead of marching around the chairs in time with the music, if you want to win, hover in front of a chair, and speed up when there is no chair, and grab a seat when the music stops, if necessary, elbowing another player out of the way. I used to think that all the players should march around the chairs in time to the music. That the player who speeds up and slows down is cheating. And if the music stops when a player is smack in front of a chair, it is luck, not skill.

Growing up in New York, part of life was using public transportation, and my fellow passengers were participants in musical chairs. The game started before the subway car, bus or trolley appeared. The savvy player would first place him or herself where they anticipate the vehicle would stop, so they would be first on. Everyone would rush into the car looking for a vacant seat. No vacant seat? Look for someone whom you think will get off at the next stop and place yourself in front. Some riders developed the skill of beginning to sit down even before the seated passenger has gotten up.

The next variation of musical chairs is wherever there is more than one line. It could be at a bank, or a bank of elevators, at supermarkets, or any store where there are lots of cashiers. Here, the patron looks for the shortest line, or the line where other patrons have carts with the fewest items.

Some stores have eliminated multiple lines, thus apparently eliminating the game. But not entirely. Then, “players” scan the single line to see if there is anyone they know. When a familiar face is spotted, the player casually walks over and engages that person in conversation, gradually working him or herself into the line.

Another variation are at theatres where there are no reserved seats, or sale days at department stores. Oy, the pushing and shoving. I have read frightening news stories of the crush of crowds trampling people, in order to be among the first to get in. It was not quite the same at CCNY, but class registration required maneuvering to get close to the head of the line to register for classes that we desperately wanted, before they closed. (Which brings to mind the perplexing question: Do you stand ON line or IN line?) But I digress.

To an economist, musical chairs illustrates how we live in a world of scarcity. You have a want, but there are limited resources. In the game of musical chairs, it is the absence of a chair, which all players are seeking. Or the absence of a subway seat, or the absence of quick service, or the absence of a bargain. Or the absence of something you want, (gasoline, chocolate, Broadway tickets) where demand is greater than supply.

In a world dominated by the musical chairs mentality, people turn selfish, thoughtless and rude. We would like a world of people who are thoughtful, courteous, kind, and generous. My mother taught me to give up my seat to elderly people, not to race somebody for an empty seat. To hold the door open for people coming after me. To help old people cross the street. To be kind to animals. To give charity to the poor. All of this is the opposite of the musical chairs mentality. We want a life and a world where everyone cooperates, and helps one another. Instead, we find ourselves in a world of competition, a world of musical chairs.

To win at musical chairs, you outsmart the other players. You cheat, out-maneuver, insinuate yourself into the most advantageous spot. It is not like winning a race where you are the fastest (and drug-free). It is based on being the sneakiest. Football players' brains are damaged by concussions. Nasty musical chairs players' brains are damaged by possessing the wrong values. For a better life and a better world, "a shenere un bessere velt," we will have to find a way to rid it of the musical chairs mentality.

End of sermon.

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