

# A Lesson From Gettysburg

(Do Your Best ... The Rest is Out of Your Hands)

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About two years ago Jeff and I began discussing the possibility of combining our offerings: the Gettysburg experience which he has become very well known for, and the Samurai Game® which Allied Ronin uses in courses – corporate, public and at some universities. It would make for an interesting seminar, to say the least. In support of this we decided it was best for me to fly east and attend one of Jeff's Gettysburg programs.

This past July I had the opportunity to join forty administrators and educators from the Walnut School District who had traveled southern California to participate in a week-long leadership experience. July 25th was dedicated to entire day walking with Jeff on the battlefield.



Giroux & McCausland  
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I've seen the movie about Gettysburg, starring Martin Sheen and Jeff Daniels; maybe you have, too. The tactics employed in this famous turning point of the American Civil War were part of the curriculum when I was a cadet at West Point. I've read articles and books and listened to organizational behaviorists lecture about it. But to actually walk the battlefield is a dramatically different thing ... particularly with temperature, humidity and daylight conditions matching the four days in 1863, when the Army of Northern Virginia led by Robert E. Lee collided headlong with the Army of the Potomac led by George Meade in one of the most dramatic conflicts in American history. Books and films create an appreciative imagination. Being on the ground makes things come alive.

There are many lessons of Gettysburg that are interesting to study. The Union commander Major General George Meade used democratic methods to understand and tap the strength of his generals and officers. By so doing he ran the risk of losing valuable time, but he gained the confidence and consensus needed to withstand an adversary that heretofore proved itself superior. Confederate Lieutenant General James Longstreet agonized with enormous internal conflict knowing that he should disregard Lee's orders to attack the middle of the Union line on the morning of July 3rd. His loyalty to Lee dominated this turmoil and the resulting action cost the Confederacy thousands of lives. Some argue that Longstreet's loyalty, though admirable, probably precipitated the psychological turning point of the war. Others fault Lee's single minded belief in himself and his cause, and they say this created an unwillingness on his, Lee's, part to read and see the soundness of Longstreet's argument against and objections to making a suicidal assault

But rather than these great lessons, it was one incident that captured my interest and has me thinking today about the profoundness of small things and the influences we have and don't have with each other.

It happened over the course of a few moments on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, the second full day of the battle, along a small piece of ground at the very southern end of the Union line – a downward slope of hill called Little Round Top. Colonel Joshua Chamberlain and two hundred soldiers that remained of his once large regiment, the Twentieth Maine, held a make-or-break piece of turf for the entire Union army. Chamberlain had been ordered to stay put, and if he failed in his mission to hold this piece of ground all would be lost. In an effort to strengthen his position he told his B Company commander, a Captain Morrill, to drop off the side of the hill and “go out there a good distance and keep me informed.” But Chamberlain didn't articulate what “a good distance” meant. That bit of information was left to the imagination of Morrill.

Chamberlain wanted Morrill to venture only a short ways, take a look, AND to stay connected. However Morrill heard something a little different. And that little difference made ALL THE DIFFERENCE in overall outcome of the day's action. He dropped off the side of the hill as instructed ... but then ... he just kept going ... running his fifty some troops out of contact, up the side of another hill and completely out of touch with the man who had made the request and who desperately did not want him absent from what was actually about to happen. Chamberlain must have been dumbfounded when he saw Morrill disappear, or perhaps he was horrified. But it was too late, and soon afterwards their enemy attacked.

Has that ever happened to you? Perhaps not on this scale. But have you ever said something to someone and you thought what you had said was pretty clear and simple, and then you realized that for whatever reason the person you were talking to heard a very different message than what you had intended ... and soon they were off and gone and doing something you had never considered or intended or wanted or imagined?

Maybe you are a parent and to one of your children you said, “Go down the street and find out what's going on with your sister and let me know.” And your one child did. But rather than come back and tell you right away they got distracted and took a while getting back to you. Or maybe you said to your husband or wife or lover when they told you they were going to be late coming home, “Oh, that's OK, no problem. Just get here when you can.” But when 15 minutes turned into an hour and a half, some old internal story of yours from your past, something that has created your internal map of who you can and cannot trust, crept into your thinking and you began resenting your partner. Or maybe you offered to someone who works for or with you that they “handle the situation and solve the problem.” But when they did what they thought was best, and it didn't match your methods, you stepped in to micro-manage and attempted to control things ... and before all was said and done you had a mess on your hands.

Or maybe one day you said something very innocently to someone, maybe someone you loved, and the person you were talking to heard something that sounded like a voice from part of an unresolved or hidden past that had nothing to do with you, a voice that wasn't you, a voice that you knew nothing about and maybe never will. And then that person cut off communication with you. And you didn't know why, and you still don't know why. You can guess at the reasons, but you don't know for certain. And no matter how hard you try to find out the truth from them, they won't say – maybe because they can't or maybe because the just aren't ready. But there you have it – and you have to get on with life without them. Sounds pretty psychological, huh. Strange, you say? Actually, it is psychological and this kind of thing happens all the time.

It may be quite a leap to put our everyday lives and communication on the same scale as the desperate situation that occurred July 2nd, 1863, on Little Round Top between two great opposing forces at Gettysburg. But the Chamberlain-Morrill episode did get me thinking.

The fact is this – big situation or small situation - in life you can plan all you want, and you can think you are communicating, but ultimately you never really control much ... and in the end all you can do is your best with what you've got. Which can really be quite a lot. BUT IT'S NOT EVEN CLOSE TO EVERYTHING THAT WILL IMPACT THE SITUATION. If you want guarantees, forget about it. There really is no such thing as a guaranteed outcome. Plans can start actions happening. But once the action starts, situations become dynamic and they change – like water running down the side of a hill – they gain

momentum and alter course depending on what they encounter along the way ... and most of what they encounter has nothing to do with what you put there ... it has to do with what was there long before you arrived on the scene. None of us live in vacuums. Other people have minds of their own, reasons of their own, and influences of their own ... and they take actions based on their own set of internal conversations. We do the best that we can with what we've got.

What happened the late afternoon of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1863, after Morrill left to go off "a good distance?" A large Confederate force assaulted up Little Round Top. The Union's Twentieth Maine Regiment fought as best they could but they ran out of ammunition. And knowing they would probably not survive the day, Chamberlain issued a desperate order to fix bayonets and charge downhill into an army that as far as he knew had lots of firepower. It was the best he could do given the situation and conditions and directive to hold his ground. And as he was charging down into what appeared to be certain death whose company should appear to his left? Morrill's! Coming down into the fray Morrill was fresh for action with over three thousand rounds of ammunition spread amongst his troops. He had been sitting atop a hill he was not supposed to be on. Maybe he was bored or worried. By one account he offered something like the following to Chamberlain when he got back, "I thought I'd better come back and help, but you said to stay out there, so I did, and looks like everything worked out all right." According to Michael Shaara who wrote a best selling novel about Gettysburg, Morrill thought it was the easiest fight he had ever been in; upon which Chamberlain told him, "Next time I tell you to go out a ways, don't go quite so far."

Reports from some captured Confederates suggested that they thought Morrill's company of fifty-some men was some phantom Union regiment, maybe a few thousand soldiers, and being surprised by Chamberlain's charge and now shocked this unknown "large force" they surrendered. Ironically, what's true is that the people they surrendered to had almost no ammunition left.

What would have happened had Captain Morrill followed the instructions the way Chamberlain intended? What if this error in communication had never occurred? What if Morrill had only dropped down a few yards off that small rise and stayed in contact rather than run up onto another hill and sit and wonder and wait and finally return? Perhaps he and all his soldiers would have used up their ammunition too when the Confederates made their gallant assault up Little Round Top. Perhaps the error he made actually saved the day. We don't know and we never will ... because we can't ... it's not what happened. Chamberlain did what he did. Morrill did what he did. The battle turned out the way it did. There were no guarantees for either side.

Do the best you can do and keep doing your best.  
The rest really is out of your hands.