

“Don’t do anything for the first time”

Remarks on the occasion of the 2021 Annual Review
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The Andrew W Marshall Foundation does not yet have a heraldic shield with a Latin motto in the banderole.

My point of departure is an ironic suggestion for the motto.

In Latin it would be *Non aliquid primum*,

or, in more verbose English, **Don’t do anything for the first time.**

I offer this motto but as an antithesis, for vehement rejection.

No form of life that adopts the motto “Don’t do anything for the first time” can grow or even survive.

Consider a human infant. A child acquires language and speaks, and starts to walk, run, and jump, much to the joy and pride of parents.

Much of what a child does for the first time is for survival, but a lot of it is for play, for rehearsal.

In fact when we watch kittens or puppies, we observe them play at activities *later* necessary for survival. Humans have retained the biological instinct for play and amplified it into the basis of much of our culture.

Going back to the 4th century BC, the Roman most responsible for building the Appian Way, Caecus, wrote of *homo faber*, how humans are toolmakers and create their environments.

In 1938, at the edge of World War II, when the phrase *homo sapiens* was especially dubious, the Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, published a brilliant book *Homo ludens*, an exploration of the social functions of play.

Huizinga argues that play is older than culture, because culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and cat and dogs and our other companion animals did not wait for humans to teach them to play. Huizinga argues that play is the primary formative element in human culture.

Andy Marshall liked classics, and I suspect he had a copy of Huizinga's book, which has a learned, daring chapter on "Play and War" spanning Greek, Chinese, Japanese, Mohammedan, Medieval, and more recent sources.

Andy had a keen sense of play. If Christopher Marlowe had written about Andy instead of Helen of Troy, he might have written that Andy's was the face that launched 1000 war games.

One insight from play is the importance of analysis of multipurpose objects, like a ball or a knife. Objects created for one purpose often turn out to have many. Children, unconstrained by tradition, regularly and inventively transform objects in play. So do adults, for whom for example a light truck can become an office, hotel room, tailgate, shed, and back-up generator. But multipurpose objects can be hard for bureaucracies to describe and assess, much less allocate their costs to various uses.

One can say the same about a system as well as an object. No military system is used for the precise purpose for which it is designed. Systems are things that have a history in time and thus also likely require change. Change, strangely, is the only truly predictable attribute of most systems.

We can usually afford just to discard broken or exhausted toys. When we are not playing, the costs of this strategy are often unacceptably high. We enter the adult world of the so-called "ilities" – including maintainability, reliability, and operability. Andy combined his sense of play with keen sensitivity to the "ilities" for our side and for our competitors.

The good news for me from 2021 is that the youthful Marshall Foundation understands the need to play, to experiment, and then to grow while retaining that spirit of play. The good news from 2021 is that the Foundation did numerous things for the first time.