

The Secret of the Universe

I'm going to tell you the Secret of the Universe. No extra charge, what all the philosophers have been seeking. The secret of the universe is.... Life is like a gum-ball machine.

That's it; see how simple? You thought it was going to be more complicated, right? That's why everyone else has missed it! Life is a gum-ball machine; you have to learn what you have to put in, to get the gum-balls back.

I have a new granddaughter, a week old today: Rachel Louise Hodges; I call her "R.L." She will not be a teenager until two years into the New Century. She has been learning, learning, learning during the six-and-a-half days of her life, learning how to make the gum-ball machine pay off; actually, when you're that young, it's a milk machine; gum-balls come later, in their infinite variety.

It works like this: you can't see anything but blurs, you can't turn over, you can't do anything with your hands and feet, but there is this gosh-awful craving in your tummy, so that you have to open your mouth and make a loud noise; and then something wonderful happens: someone puts something miraculous in your mouth, and you suck on it, and the pain in your tummy goes away and you feel yummy. Then, sometime soon thereafter, the magic of learning takes place for the very first time: you learn that there's a connection between crying and getting fed! Every baby recreates the Helen Keller miracle, connection between this and that, cause and effect!

Another wonder comes to pass: you SMILE (maybe by accident) and they hug you. They make happy noises at

you and pick you up and squeeze you in their nice, strong arms! And that delicious experience, that it is wonderful to be held in warm, loving arms, will continue as long as you have breath.

Then another marvel: a choice! A crossroads, a fork in the road, one of the great watersheds of each life: do you cry or do you smile, to make life work, to make it give you what you want? How much cry, how loud, how long? How much smile, what kind of smile, to which one of the blurs? That choice, that behavioral decision, the smile-or-shriek decision, will be repeated each waking hour the rest of your life: how do you get the gum-balls? How do you get the automobiles, how do you get the cash, the icing on the cake, the love and affection of the person of your dreams? How much grin, how much groan?

This is what you get to decide.

From 1989, given to the Presbyterian Youth Triennium.
By Houston Hodges, recorded in 2016 for WLRH Radio,
Huntsville AL USA