The Grilled Cheese Principle
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I have a memory of being about five years old, picking up a beautiful grilled cheese sandwich made for me by my hard-working mother and turning it over to see that the other side was burned. Suddenly, what I thought was the perfect sandwich was not so perfect. Mom had tried (unsuccessfully) to hide that fact from me. There was no question; I ate it anyway without complaining. However, that moment (actually several moments, as that situation repeated often throughout my childhood) has stuck in my mind for many years. Now, at the age of 43 as a mother of two children and as a biology professor where I am routinely the “academic mother” of hundreds of students every year, I find that I believe in The Grilled Cheese Principle. Here is what I mean.

Making a grilled cheese sandwich is easy, right? But when I think of how many burned grilled cheese sandwiches I have eaten, or I have made myself, I realize that most of the grilled cheese sandwiches I have known have had at least one burned side. The thing is, that although it is a relatively easy thing to make I can also easily lose focus, and before long the sandwich is burned. For my mother, the first side was usually perfect and the second side got burned due to her being distracted. For me, I have tended to burn the first side, but then I more carefully monitor the second side. Either way, the grilled cheese sandwich suffers because it has not been given the attention it deserves.

So, I have learned that even the most tedious and simple task deserves my full attention. When I am multitasking, I am doing none of the tasks well. And when I allow myself to be distracted, I am not in the present moment—not paying attention to the small details of living or enjoying the process.

So now, I believe the best way to make a perfect grilled cheese sandwich is to make only one at a time and give it my full attention. I start by carefully melting the butter in the pan over low heat, adding one slice of bread, then carefully adding thinly sliced cheese, then adding the other slice of bread. I may add a lid to cover the sandwich to ensure more even heating. I must carefully attend to that sandwich even if my mind starts wandering to other details of life that need my attention. The sandwich must be flipped when the underside of the bread is perfectly golden and then this process is repeated, with the other side.

The Grilled Cheese Principle is my analogy for many of life’s activities that are easy to accomplish yet tedious to perform. I know that when I don’t give a task my full attention, most outcomes will be mediocre or worse. For me, excellence can be achieved by doing the ordinary very well and with great care. When I avoid being rushed and take pride in the simple steps, I believe whether in personal or professional matters, I will achieve uncommon and appreciated perfection.