A Team of 10-year-olds reminded me what’s important.

Most nights from April through October I can be found at a ballpark. Every ball game is an opportunity for discovery. However small, each nugget of information or understanding enhances the enjoyment of the game. Learning, as the Chinese proverb goes, is like rowing upstream: to cease is to fall back.

Take Monday night at Fenway Park. I learned that Tigers manager Jim Leyland, in all his years of managing, has won no more than two arguments with umpires, that one of the Detroit pitchers, who shall remain nameless for now, has been tipping his pitches, that former Red Sox outfielder Ellis Burks so disliked the intense media environment in Boston that he asked the team to trade him, and that Detroit rookie reliever Joel Zumaya, who can throw 100 mph, admits to occasionally trying to throw as hard as he can, which is how he came to throw one pitch at 102 that night.

Nothing of Confucius-like heavy wisdom there, just another day to appreciate the nuanced beauty of the game.

Mind you, though, I am talking about baseball, not just major league baseball, because many of the summer nights I spend with the game take place at diamonds on which the bases are only 60 feet apart. As rookie manager of the 10-year-old Cal Ripken Baseball team in Montgomery, N.J., I came to understand that the size of the lessons can have an inverse proportional relationship to the size of the field and the players.

Our team, made up of 12 players who had played for three different teams last year and chosen from among only about three dozen players who tried out in a small town, began as an unknown quantity. It ended up in the Cal Ripken World Series in Lafayette, LA, having won districts, state and regional’s and, in the final count 40 out of 44 games

Winning, without the need to apologize, is fun. But the real reward is learning from 10-year-old kids, who have the power to teach us if we are smart enough to listen to them, to keep ourselves paddling upstream.

Here are six lessons I learned from them.

1. **FREE YOURSELF FROM ALL EXPECTATIONS.** Expectations are only boundaries to your imagination. At 10, anything is possible. Our team was five outs away from elimination in the Mid-Atlantic Regional’s, losing 3-0. And then, after hitting one home run run the entire season to that point, we suddenly went home run, double, single, home run to win the game 4-3. (The home runs were the first for those two players in their lives.) I used to think the greatest game I ever saw in person was Game 7 of the 1991 World Series. Not anymore.

2. **BE WARY OF ADULTS WHO DON’T SMILE AROUND CHILDREN.** We had an umpire in regional’s who refused to let batters take practice swings in between pitches, who refused to let the catcher visit the mound to talk to the pitcher and who called a third strike on a batter while the boy was getting instructions from his third base coach (the umpire had refused to grant him time.) “Don’t hold up my game!” the umpire told my catcher after informing him he could not visit the mound. Our kids were intimidated by the old goat, not to mention his I’m-in-a-hurry-to-get-out-of-here strike zone.

There was another impatient umpire who barked at me when my center fielder wasn’t in place to start an inning in time to his liking, even after I explained to him, “He’s in the bathroom. He’s a 10-year-old kids! He’s gotta go!” Memo to umpires, managers, coaches, parents and fans: It’s not about you and your agenda any longer.
3. **LOOK OUT THE AIRPLANE WINDOW AND DAYDREAM.** Enough with the laptop solitaire or expense report. Earth from above is humbling and inspiring. At 10, the kids were still innocent enough to be entertained by natural wonders we take for granted. Flying over scores of lakes in South Florida, the kids shouted out their interpretations of the naturally carved shapes. “Look, a rhinoceros!” “That one looks like a rabbit!”

4. **GO BOWLING.** It’s the Hawaiian shirt of sports: It’s impossible to be crabby with it. The kids insisted we go bowling when we had off days. As the manager, I liked the bonding aspect of a safe team activity held in the air-conditioning. They, however, immediately grasped the cool factor of wearing Day-Glo shoes and eating fried foods while trying to knock things down indoors – parental permission not necessary. And there is the magic of the occasional strike, when even a kid achieves the same moment of pure perfection that a professional seeks.

5. **CHILDHOOD PASSES QUICKLY ENOUGH; DON’T RUSH IT.** At the World Series we noticed how common it was for teams to allow 10-year-olds to throw curveballs frequently and to pitch six innings in a game, nearly or exceeding 100 pitches. Crazy! One of my favorite parts of each game was the 10 minutes before the game would start. My coaches and I would stay quiet and leave the kids to themselves in the dugout. We’d be entertained by the kids just being kids, unconstrained by adults. They might eat hot dogs or twizzlers and talk about anything in the world except baseball, such as teachers, the hotel pool, the taste of fried alligator, what they dreamed about the previous night or the joys of bowling.

6. ** Cherish Every Moment.** Being 10 is the heart of the wonder years. The world is still packed with a sense of newness in which even what we as adults think of as setbacks and obstacles are just more opportunities for adventure and discovery. A three-hour delayed flight becomes an invitation to play touch football in the corridor of the St. Louis Airport and hotel gift shops are as exotic and inviting as Neiman Marcus. The kids are still young enough to be so trusting of the world, always anticipating its lightness and goodness.

You volunteer for a job to teach some kids a little about baseball and the kids wind up teaching you about life. Only eight teams in the country played their way through regional’s to get to the 10-year-old World Series, so it was a summer we’ll never forget. But the lessons and the bonds that come from sharing the experience are just as lasting.

One of the last moments of the season happens to be one of my favorites. We were in New Orleans airport, having just cleared security and started a long walk through a concourse to our departure gate to begin the journey home. My left fielder (a sweet kid who once told me, “I like spending money; it’s an expensive hobby.”) passed by a kiosk selling popcorn.

“Oh, popcorn!” he said excitedly as he walked on. “Let’s come back!”

“We can’t,” another outfielder said.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because,” said one of my pitchers, who had missed the part about the popcorn, “we’re only 10 for one year.”