

Competing with Love by Somik Raha

□The Japanese warrior looked perplexed. He had just offered tea to his Chinese adversary and asked whether his guest fully appreciated its quality, only to be told, “Nature does not make distinctions on tea. We do. I am not interested in the finer distinctions of the tea you have offered me because I have already decided to enjoy it.” The Japanese warrior slowly asked, “By the same logic, I take it then that you don’t consider any martial art as superior or inferior?” The Chinese warrior nodded and said, “Yes. It is the skill of the practitioner that brings out the essence of the art, and some are more skilled than others.” The Japanese warrior retorted, “If this is so, why are there so many martial art competitions in China?” The Chinese warrior responded, “They are for practitioners to discover their edges and improve.” Moved, the Japanese warrior said, “So, it is not others we are trying to beat. The great enemy is within.” He bows to his adversary and there ends one of the most sublime conversations (paraphrased) in the Jet Li martial arts flick Fearless.

□Competition is a hot topic right now. In the upcoming US elections, an important plank for many politicians is helping the US compete better in the world economy. Within the current administration, too, President Obama has unveiled a program called Race to the Top to help reform the education system and improve the grades students get in schools in the US. The idea is that this may help them eventually compete better in a global workplace. But what if we have gotten it upside down? Are more resources really the missing ingredient in helping people improve themselves?

□Growing up in India, I had a hard time with most of my subjects, especially math. One day, after looking at my grades, my father had a heart-to-heart chat with me. He said, “The way to crack your subjects is to fall in love with them. When you start loving what you are learning, it will no longer look like work. Everything will fall in place after that. Just fall in love.” I was in sixth grade around then, and decided to take him seriously and literally said, “I love you” to my math textbook.

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□Then, something strange happened. I actually fell in love. I started enjoying the mystery behind each geometric question, soaking in it, and experiencing joy when I was able to solve it. Over the years, it got to a point where I would finish all the exercises in the textbook in a day and repeat it the next day and the day after. I would be thrilled to get an unknown question so I could soak in it and enjoy its mystery. Along with this head-over-heels love, my grades started improving. When I finished tenth grade, I had scored 99% in math - in those days, I was told the computer systems had only two digits for the score, and that was about the highest you could get. But the weirdest thing was

that I didn't care at all about my grades anymore. I truly enjoyed the subject.

□ Being naturally curious, I wanted to see how far this could go. I remember trying the "I love you" principle with other subjects that were really boring to me, like history. Suddenly, history came alive for me, and I started enjoying it very much, too. Stepping it up, I was convinced that one just could not love English grammar. But trying it there, I developed a love for writing which continues to this day. This philosophy completely transformed my life, improved my grades, and most importantly, made me simply stop caring about grades and actually enjoy learning.

□ Talking to others, I know now that my experience is in no way unique - anyone who has truly excelled in anything has fallen in love. So, maybe we should be talking about love budgets more than education budgets. Of course, the term would be an oxymoron, since love cannot be bought and it is also not a finite resource that diminishes when given. All we need in order to raise our children's grades is to love them and inspire them to try loving what they study.

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□ This perspective doesn't stop with our children. As Howard Thurman famously said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." What if we can decide to come alive and love what is in front of us, irrespective of what we do? What would our life look like? What would our work look like? Maybe the decision to love can lead to "being in love" -- a breakthrough idea worth experimenting with.

□ More broadly, given the evidence that people in love are very difficult to compete with, the national strategy of any country or company wanting to compete should be love. And the test of whether the love is authentic is that the minds of those who are in love are free from any desire of great outcomes. If we think this is that far out, we now have the biography of Steve Jobs to turn to, where, with all of his blemishes and reality distortion fields, the one thing that stands out for me was the importance of love in his work, and the unwavering focus on hiring people who love what they do. This philosophy has made Apple tremendously successful, becoming the world's most valuable company as measured by market cap.

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□ One may rightfully ask, if love is what we need, then is competition useful anymore? After all, competition has often misguided us into obsessing about destroying others instead of improving ourselves. But competition is just a system we've created. We create systems to tie ourselves to action and bring our values into our life. For instance, we may like to think that brushing our teeth represents practical value for us, but we don't get that value unless we create a system that gets us to brush regularly (i.e. every morning and night). The number of times we brush is a useful metric to check that we are being consistent with our intention to brush daily, but it does not represent the uncountable value of dental hygiene.

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□ Similarly, the system of competition is of value not because it gives us a metric of wins and losses, but because it shows us where our edges are. It's one thing to merely say that we love what we do, but competition is the context in which we get to test our own authenticity. Are we distracted by the fear of external opponents, or can we trust in something more fundamental -- our limitless love of what we do. Seen in this light, competition is an invaluable feedback mechanism that helps us become truer to ourselves, and instead of being shunned, it should be embraced with total confidence in our deepest values.

□ In my professional work in strategy consulting, I have been pleasantly surprised to note how a beating in the marketplace humbles big egos, gets people to face up to their gaps, open up to learning and commit to self-improvement. And they do all this without engaging in philosophical discussions on love or perfection. The ritual of competitive strategy development gets people to act as though self-perfection were an accepted end-goal, albeit under the guise of achieving market success.

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□ Am I just whitewashing the fact that most people just want to make money and don't care about love or perfection? There is growing evidence that this is not the case. Research has shown that compensation in the workplace takes precedence, but only up to a point where decent survival is at stake. Once it crosses that threshold, it ceases to be the most interesting factor, yielding the top-spot to what author Dan Pink calls autonomy, mastery and purpose -- all intrinsic motivators.

□ The ancient sages of India understood one more motivator, an even deeper truth: what if there were no other, and if we were actually part of the same organism? What if, as poet Pavithra Mehta says, "All boundaries are lines drawn in the imagination (like the equator)?" Could the boundaries we draw during competition then be the result of a myopic view of the self?

□ To appreciate this view, take this ridiculous but illustrative example: imagine your toe complaining to you about all the resources taken up by your thumb and making the case for more attention. It seems ludicrous to consider, given that our consciousness is of an integrated whole, and not limited to toe -- or thumb -- identity. From an integrated perspective, we ground ourselves in the whole when making decisions about the parts.

□ This evolved way of seeing arises naturally when we are connected to those deep, internal motivations -- love for what we are doing, an inherent striving for perfectibility, and a fundamentally integrated viewpoint. We can then think clearly about our values, dream wildly about how those values can come to life with beautiful projects and services, plan smartly to pull it off with limited resources and love every step of the process.

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□ Authentic competition is deeply sacred. Instead of fragmentation and bitterness, authentic competition brings with it a sense of wholeness and love. The intense yearning that springs from that love burns all barriers that keep us separate from the essence of what we seek to know, including all the concepts that we've used to get this far, for they

are the ultimate barrier to the experience. Recalling a famous Sufi poet's observation, "naive is the one who confuses the concept 'water' for water itself - such a one is destined to die of thirst." A good reason to go beyond our concepts and truly enjoy the cup of tea in our hand.