

Competitive Ambitions

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Ever since the Olympics wrapped up two weeks ago with a motherlode of medals for American athletes, the U.S. Olympic team has been rhapsodically celebrated as heroes except, of course, for two of the less radiant stars.

Swimmer Ryan Lochte, in spite of his impressive accomplishments in the pool, was not so successful in avoiding hot water in the night streets of Rio. His intoxicated idiocy resulted in more damage to his public image and commercial brand than all he ever gained as the second most decorated Olympic swimmer behind Michael Phelps. He, of course, lost his four corporate sponsors (including Speedo and Ralph Lauren), though I'm told, if he wins the Mirror Ball in the upcoming season of "Dancing with the Stars," all shall be forgiven. Even Brazilians love a good dancer!

Then, there is Hope Solo, the brilliant, yet brash, goalie for the U.S. Women's Soccer team. Apparently lacking good sportmanship after their loss to Sweden in the Gold Medal game, Solo must now go solo, having been suspended from the team for six months. Some feel the penalty is far too harsh, arguing that had she made those same disparaging comments about the Swedes as a member of the *Norwegian* team, she would have been nominated for a Nobel Prize!

I admit, it is hard not to get caught up in the competitive spirit of the Olympics. For the two weeks in Rio, I was glued every evening to the telecast of sporting events I would normally flip past during the rest of the year. For some reason, watching the balance beam competition or synchronized swimming was just as riveting to me as the bottom of the ninth inning in a Yankee-Red Sox game. I was caught up in the electric

excitement of events like horse-jumping, badminton, and weightlifting, just because it was global competition. Here, I profess to be a lifelong international peacemaker working to bring people together and I was cheering for the U.S. team to beat the crap out of the Chinese and Russians! Go figure.

It's strange how the competitive spirit takes ahold of us and skews our normal perspective and psyche. No surprise, the effects of competition vary and can be both beneficial and harmful, particularly to the participants.

Social psychologist, D.J. Siegel, writes:

Like it or not, competition is a fact of life, the driving force behind evolution, and an intrinsic part of the human experience. Any time two or more parties, whether they are individuals, sports teams, corporate groups, political parties, or countries, strive to attain a goal that cannot be shared, competition will occur.

The goal can be concrete (survival, being hired, winning a soccer match, becoming a millionaire) or more ephemeral (being beautiful, gaining prestige), but it usually requires an investment of energy and resources. For example, in a rugby match, two teams compete to score the most points and win a trophy (a concrete goal) but winning also means attaining the more elusive goals of increased pride, prestige, and satisfaction at having bettered an opponent.¹

Competition, of course, creates a conflict due to “mutually exclusive goal attainment” (when two or more are seeking the same objective, but only one can achieve it), where ambition and aggression rise up in competitive rivalry. Consequently, the motivation for personal achievement can take its toll on human relations when a rival becomes an obstacle to be overcome, instead of a person with whom to relate. Frankly, the mindset associated with looking out for our own best interests can make people crazy trying to jockey themselves into more advantageous positions or places in relation to others. Yet, in a zero-sum world (where

¹ D.J. Siegel, “Vying for the Prize: Competition in Large and Small Groups,” *Observer*, Vol. 23, No. 9, November 2010.

for one to win, someone else has to lose), to fight for all you can get is the only way to succeed. Competitive ambitions often motivate us to strive for advantages over others, even when a more cooperative spirit would be best for everyone.

Still, as inherent as this seems, some social scientists challenge the premise that competitive ambitions are basic to human nature. The acclaimed anthropologist, Margaret Mead, for instance, believed that a competitive drive in people was a cultural construct more than an innate human trait. She cited studies of the Zuni and Iroquois tribes in North America, as well as the Bathonga of South Africa, the Tangu of New Guinea, and other tribal communities elsewhere. In those settings, competition was virtually unknown and avoided whenever it arose, as each primitive culture was essentially cooperative and collective, where resources were fairly shared. Her belief was that competitive ambitions may only be a learned behavior picked up from the social environment that fosters and rewards it, rather than from basic instincts or nature.

If that's true, then we must learn it fairly early on and consistently here in the U.S., since we are likely the most competitive society history has even known. Think about it. In many households where achievement is encouraged and rewarded, kids stake out their place, competing with their siblings for parental attention or in differentiating themselves from others through achievements, talents, aspirations, and skills. Competitive ambitions get reinforced even further in sports and in school (grades, the social hierarchy of middle school, class rank, college recruitment), and later the workplace, the political realm, the entertainment industry and celebrity culture, and in so many other arenas of life, where people compete for personal and professional honors and recognition and financial rewards.

Without question, Western cultures have promoted competition in the marketplace as not just a norm, but as the ideal (if not an idol), based on the belief that competition inspires economic advancement and a personal ambition to excel. There are many benefits, to be sure. However, it's become virtually treasonous to call any of it into question, especially in this day and age. As a result, we don't seem to be able to have rational and substantive discussions about the impact that excessive competition has on our culture or upon individual lives.

However, despite the underlying assumption that competition brings out our best, that actually may not be true, according to Alfie Kohn, who has written extensively on this topic over the years in evaluating education and social behavior. He has identified and debunked four myths associated with the merits of competition. One has already been noted: that competition is inevitable (like Mead, he says no). Myth 2 is that competition keeps productivity high and results in greater excellence. According to Kohn, this is not necessarily the case. Years ago, researchers at the University of Minnesota evaluated and analyzed over a hundred different

...studies of classroom achievement conducted from 1924 to 1980. Sixty-five found that cooperation promotes higher achievement than competition, eight found the reverse, and thirty-six found no significant difference. One after another, researchers across the country have come to the same conclusion: Children do not learn better when education is transformed into a competitive struggle.²

Kohn then goes on to debunk two other myths about competition: 1) that competition is a requirement for recreation and entertainment (i.e., in fact, noncompetitive games are found to be more inclusive and socially

²Alfie Kohn, "No Contest: A Case Against Competition," *New Age Journal*, September/October 1986, pg. 20. This is based on Kohn's book, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, Houghton/Mifflin, 1986, 1992.

enhancing), and 2) that personal character is built through competitive challenges. In reference to the latter, he cites research that, instead of building character, competitive settings more often undermine it by motivating people to bend the rules to their favor, if not cheat, particularly in zero-sum circumstances, where for one to win, others have to lose, and where the reward for winning is high and the cost for failure is great.

Cheating, of course, continues to be a significant problem in professional and amateur sports (e.g., Lance Armstrong, various Major League ballplayers, Russian Olympic team, etc.), in large and small businesses, on taxes, on Wall St, in education, as well as other parts of society as people try to improve their odds of winning. We often attribute this to a breakdown in moral character and the loss of traditional values. However, it appears the problems associated with cheating have more to do with the degree of competition that has been introduced into our society on every level. Everywhere we go, people are driven to win (even dishonestly), rather than face the consequences of failure or to miss out on the expected reward.

The irony is, an excessively competitive environment such as ours typically doesn't result in greater excellence across the board; instead, it actually accentuates feelings of failure and discouragement, since there are far more who won't come out on top than do. Once they realize they cannot measure up to the standards achieved by others, many people often don't work as hard or as dedicated. Excessive competition sets most people up to fail, particularly when others are viewed as having significant advantages over them toward achievement. "Horatio Alger" is not a symbol of common efforts at hard work leading to financial success; it's an anomaly, an outlier, not the norm or a rule in our society.

So if competitive ambitions aren't the best way to be our best as a society, what is? Kohn and many others would argue that cooperation results in higher overall achievement in human society, as people build off one another and value the achievements of others. A cooperative (and psychologically healthier) outlook allows for an individual to view him/herself as a part of the whole—as interdependent with, rather than in competition with others—as integrated with, instead of differentiated from, people. A cooperative spirit results in stronger self-esteem and achievable accomplishments, as well as lessening the social distance between people in society. When there is less social distance (and I would add, economic distance), then there is greater incentive to invest oneself in the effort, as well as accountability and harmony between people in a shared society. This was not unlike what Mead and others found in cooperative tribal societies. When competition is lessened and cooperation encouraged, then individuals and society as a whole benefit. All the boats rise, instead of just a few. Win/win is ultimately more satisfying to everyone than win/lose.

In many ways, it's not a huge leap to believe Jesus would make the same claim. Cooperation, rather than competition, is the biblical model for community-building—the preferred way to build a sustainably just and benevolent society. And what's more, it's good for the human soul, whereas hyper-competitive environments are not. Yet, Jesus was surrounded by the competitive ambitions of many people around him (including his own siblings and disciples), who strived for recognition and status for the sake of personal honor and social standing and value, or who hoarded resources for their own benefit. Yet, his spiritual instruction to them was this: humble yourself in service to others and then you will become great in the realm of God.

The story from Luke's Gospel is a good illustration of this. We're told Jesus was dining at the home of a Pharisee and noted how guests clamored to seat themselves around the table. So he told a parable that could have well been a snapshot of the moment. In doing so, he unmasked the competitive ambitions of each one, chiding the one who positioned himself more closely to the seat of honor as having to suffer a humiliating demotion by being put in his place—a social disgrace and indignity that no one would want to suffer. This became a relevant message to his own disciples, who he rebuked for their competitive ambitions to sit at his right hand. Even though the Jesus' community was to be cooperative, life was often viewed as a competitive struggle for honor or for resources. So, in his counterintuitive way, Jesus proclaimed the great reversal of fortune: "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The path to wisdom and enlightenment, to peaceful relations, to shared abundance instead of scarcity, to being righteous and noble in the eyes of God—to enter into the spirit of the realm of God—one must maintain a spirit of humility and gracious service to others, rather than compete for status, honor, benefits, respect, and personal dignity. This underscores the key difference between cooperative relations and competitive ambitions: competition drives us to attain something for ourselves over and against others, whereas cooperation recognizes the supreme value of sharing and being in right relations with others.

To be honest, nothing Jesus said about service and extending honor to others makes sense unless you are spiritually mature and secure enough to recognize that goodwill and good relationships count for more in life than anything else. A competitive world tells us we must always strive for

more, that we can always have more, be more, in comparison to others; whereas a cooperative one helps us recognize that we all have our place in life and our personal betterment depends just as much on someone else being in a better place. Again, personal value and happiness in a competitive world are measured on what you can attain for yourself—goals, status, respect, privilege, etc.; in a cooperative world, it's based on what you give to and receive from others, which provides benefits and rewards that can't be measured by any monetary scale. Far too often, as we often see, competitive ambitions can cause you to lose more in life than you will ever gain.

So let me bring this full circle. Of all the images that captured my attention at the Olympics this year, the one that remains with me is of two female distance runners, American Abbey D'Agostino and New Zealander, Nikki Hamblin, who fell during the 5000m race with four laps to go. Instead of jumping up to catch up with the pack, Abbey helped Nikki to her feet, who had been lying in a fetal position on the track. The two of them started on their way, only to have Abbey fall again because, as she would later find out, of her torn ACL suffered in the fall. Instead of leaving her, Nikki stopped and picked up Abbey from the track and the two slowly jogged the final mile of the race to finish in last place.

In such a competitive environment, in the zenith of their individual careers, with so much at stake and on the line, these two women embodied the cooperative spirit which is what brings out the best in every human being. They may have failed to win a medal, or run the race for which they had trained so hard, but they made their mark on the Rio Olympics and on the global audience who admired their care for each other and courage to go on. Few will recall who won that particular race, but the world

remembers and embraces these two—a remarkable example of when the last became first.

In our heart of hearts, we know this is best way to be—where natural competitors wisely lay that aside and willfully help each other out in times of need. It brings us closer to the peaceable kingdom, where predator and prey can lie down together without fear. A cooperative spirit is ultimately more beneficial to us as humans than competitive ambitions, for it helps us live in right relations with others and it inspires us to be better than we otherwise might be. And in the gospel vision of Jesus, it's the only way we humans will ever enjoy a taste of what heaven is like on earth.

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