

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: A past president of the American Institute of Psychoanalysis, psychoanalyst Theodore Isaac Rubin is also a prolific author of both fiction and nonfiction. The following passage is adapted from his 1980 book Reconciliation: Inner Peace in an Age of Anxiety.

COMPETITION AND HAPPINESS

Our culture has come to believe that competition "brings out the best" in people. I believe that it brings out the worst. It is intimately linked to envy, jealousy, paranoia, and blocks the evolution and development of self. It ultimately has a depleting and deadening effect on self as its unrelenting demands are met and self-realizing needs are ignored.

In competition, the focus of one's life is essentially outside one's self. The use of our time and energy is determined by our competitors rather than by our selves and our own real needs. This weakens our own sense of identity, and to compensate for this ever-increasing feeling of emptiness and vulnerability we compete still more, perpetuating a self-depleting cycle. When enough depletion takes place to preclude further "successful" competition, we feel hopeless and futile and our lives seem purposeless. Despite talk about good sportsmanship, competition is totally incompatible with the kind of easy aliveness that is the aim of this book.

Competition is a residual of a primitive past, and it is not a genetic residual. It is passed on to us through training in our society from generation to generation. This training starts early and can usually be seen in very early sibling rivalry. I do not believe that rivalry among children of the same family is instinctual. I believe that it is engendered by parents who themselves are caught in the same trap: they spend enormous time and energy getting ahead of the Joneses. Small wonder so many children are pressured into Little League or equivalent competitive structures--all with the rationalization that these activities will promote their self-development, well-being, and health. Actually these activities and organizations nearly always serve as vicarious vehicles designed to satisfy parental craving for competitive success.

People brought up in this way feel lost if they are suddenly thrust into a situation of low competitive tension. Because they exist to compete and they've lost their *raison d'être* [reason for existence] in the new situation, they invent hierarchies and games to provide the stimulation they need to "keep the motor running," even if these inventions are ultimately destructive to inner peace and personal health.

I am reminded of my own medical school experience as part of a group of about eighty Americans studying at the university in Lausanne, Switzerland. The system was noncompetitive. People who received passing grades in the required premedical or foundation courses were accepted into the school. Two series of examinations--one in the basic sciences one and one half years after admission, and the other after studies were completed--determined qualification for graduation. Students were allowed to postpone these examinations as long as they felt was necessary. To pass, students were required to demonstrate adequate knowledge of the material. The atmosphere was totally benevolent, with no coercion or intimidation whatsoever. There was no "curve," and students were not graded relative to each other.

The Swiss students exhibited great camaraderie among themselves, helped each other, and for the most part demonstrated great proficiency in grasping and integrating the material. There were no "tricks" whatsoever, no surprise quizzes or exams. Indeed there were no examinations at all, other than the two sets of standardized government exams. Requirements for passing the examinations were well defined for everyone. Instruction was superb.

We Americans arrived as graduates of a highly competitive system. Few of us could believe that medical school could be a straightforward, noncompetitive activity, and that we would be required to learn the material we were told to learn. Stimulation addicts like ourselves found little motivation in the Swiss system--so we formed competitive cliques. Some people convinced themselves and others that the Swiss professors were tricky and that the two sets of exams could never be passed. People kept secret from each other the ready availability of course notebooks.

Bets were made as to who would and who would not get through. People tried to convince other people that they would never get through and should return home. There was much gossip about absences from classes and who was and who wasn't dedicated to medical school and his chosen field. Former friends who came to Switzerland together stopped talking to each other because they now saw each other as competition.

The Swiss went on as they always did. The Americans did also. They had re-created American competition in Switzerland.

Competition damages people other than students. It provides a stressful, isolating and paranoid atmosphere that is the very antithesis of peace of mind. Competitive strivings are not always felt directly or blatantly. They do not occur solely when we are locked in antagonistic embrace with adversaries—we have, after all, come a considerable distance from the dinosaurs. But the subtle influence of competitive standards to be met and our consciousness of how the next guy is doing—in terms of earnings, position, accomplishments, notoriety, possessions, or whatever—work their subtle and not-so-subtle corrosive effects. They provide constant pressure and undermine our efforts to build a self-realizing value system. This means that we are more involved with how the next fellow is doing than with knowing what we really want to do. We are more concerned with how *they* feel about us than how we feel about ourselves.

Competition also makes it very difficult to accept and to feel the nourishing effects of give-and-take, and often makes much-needed help from others impossible to accept. Our culture in large measure has made this paranoid closure to nourishment from others a virtue, often rationalized by ideas about independence and self-reliance. Independence and self-reliance are indeed valuable assets, but often they are actually cover-ups for fear of other people and are functions of sick pride invested in rejection of other people's much-needed help.

ESSAY TOPIC

According to Rubin, in what ways does competition limit people's access to happiness? What do you think of his views? Write an essay responding to these two questions. To develop your own position, be sure to discuss specific examples; those examples can be drawn from anything you've read, as well as from your observations and experience.