

Winning: Reflections on an American Obsession

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Winning
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Reflections on an American Obsession

Francesco Duina

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To My Children Sofia and Gianluca

New Lights in My Life
Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

[Chapter ONE THE PROBLEM](#)

[PART 2 The Pursuit](#)

[Chapter TWO DIFFERENTIATION](#)

[Chapter THREE I WIN, THEREFORE I AM RIGHT](#)

[Chapter FOUR THE QUEST FOR SPACE](#)

[Chapter FIVE POWERS AND LIMITATIONS](#)

[PART 3 Our Beliefs](#)

[Chapter SIX TYPES OF WINNERS AND LOSERS](#)

[Chapter SEVEN PROCESS VERSUS OUTCOMES](#)

[Chapter EIGHT INJECTING VALUE](#)

[Chapter NINE AWARENESS AND COMPETITION](#)

[PART 4 Conclusion](#)

[Chapter TEN OUR RESTLESSNESS](#)

[Notes](#)

[References](#)

[Index](#)

Acknowledgments

SOCIOLOGISTS BELIEVE THAT individuals produce very little on their own. They think that much of what we do benefits from our engagements with other people, places, and institutions. This book proves the point.

I spent most of the 2007–8 academic year in Denmark as a visiting faculty at the International Center for Business and Politics (Copenhagen Business School). There, I enjoyed what most academics would probably call heaven: ample time to research, the opportunity to present my ideas to excellent colleagues, and exposure to a very different system and set of values. For that, I will be forever grateful. Thanks, then, to Professors Ove K. Pedersen and Lars Bo Kaspersen for making it possible.

I first tested my ideas in 2004 at Bates College by designing a course called the Sociology of Competition. Students in that course helped me think through many of the issues and problems that this book addresses. In the subsequent years, a host of colleagues provided me with powerful insights and challenging questions. John A. Hall (McGill University) and John L. Campbell (Dartmouth College) urged me to think about the intellectual roots of the project and its practical implications for readers. Liah Greenfeld (Boston University), through conversations and her own wonderful writing, helped me see how the United States is indeed a rather unique place in the world—a place of great freedom but also considerable risks. Bruce Sacerdote (Dartmouth College), an economist, provided me with alternative and valuable explanations for why people compete. Paulette Kurzer (University of Arizona) and Gordon Fellman (Brandeis University) pushed me to reflect more about my own motivations for engaging in this project. Valuable comments came, as well, from Joshua Margolis (Harvard Business School), Shelley McDonough (Northeastern University), Grahame Thompson (Open University), Michael Sargent (Bates College), Emily Kane (Bates College), Tore Vincents Olsen (Copenhagen Business School), Jette Steen Knudsen (Copenhagen Business School), and the anonymous referees who read this book for Princeton University Press.

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athletic coaches, teachers, and state officials. Most asked that I refer to them anonymously. I thank them here for dedicating some of their precious time to me.

This book would not have been possible without the steady and wise guidance of Eric Schwartz at Princeton University Press. He exhibited the qualities any author would want an editor to have. He was supportive above all. But he was also enormously constructive and motivating in his criticisms. I am grateful to Eric for all his help. At the press, Kathleen Cioffi oversaw the production phases of the book, which included the meticulous copyediting work of Jack Rummel. I could not have asked for better support. Finally, I wish to thank my wife and companion Angela. Once again, she supported me with great wisdom and patience through years of hard work and reflection.

PART 1

Introduction

Chapter One THE PROBLEM

Now of all good things, truth holds first

place among gods and men alike.

—Plato, *Laws*, book V

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE MARVELED at the American spirit. His travels through the country in the early 1800s revealed a people with great ambitions, in constant motion, with remarkable ingenuity, and an appreciation for getting things done. In Europe, people seldom dared to dream. In the United States, where the established social and cultural orders of the old continent had been set aside and everyone had been given a fresh start, people could aspire to great things. A new society founded on equality unleashed fantastic energy, freedom, and movement. When Tocqueville asked an American sailor why the ships of his country were built to last such a short time, he was told that technological advances made any given ship obsolete in a few years. The “great nation” of the United States, Tocqueville reflected, “directs its every action” ultimately towards one goal: “indefinite perfectibility” (Tocqueville 2003: 523).

This may have been too simplistic an interpretation of the new country. But my recent yearlong stay in Denmark helped me see that Tocqueville captured something of life in the United States. Anyone spending some time in Denmark will eventually run into Jante’s Law. The law was formulated by Aksel Sandemose in his 1933 novel *A Refugee Crosses His Tracks*, where he portrays the culture and beliefs of the residents of the small Danish town of Nykøbing Mors. Virtually all Danes are familiar with the ten principles of the law. Many embrace them to a good extent. They permeate public and private life, the education system from kindergarten on, politics, business, sports, family life, and more. Here is what they say:

1. Don’t think that you are special
2. Don’t think that you are of the same standing as us
3. Don’t think that you are smarter than us
4. Don’t fancy yourself as being better than us
5. Don’t think that you know more than us
6. Don’t think that you are more important than us

7. Don't think that you are good at anything
8. Don't laugh at us
9. Don't think that anyone cares about you
10. Don't think that you can teach us anything.

Without a doubt, most of us in the United States are raised to believe exactly the opposite of Jante's Law. We are told to feel special and strive for new heights. Being smarter, better, and more knowledgeable than others are virtues, not faults. And most of us certainly believe, if not pray, that we matter and are good at something. While we do not necessarily want to laugh at others, we work extremely hard to make sure that others care about us and that we, in turn, have something that they can learn from us. Indeed, as recent comparative studies of American and Danish cultures show, Americans "hold unrealistically positive views of themselves and believe that they are much better than average on many attributes." Quite the opposite applies to the Danes (Thomsen et al. 2007: 446). Danes, in turn, "show aversion to conspicuously successful persons," while "Americans aspire to such distinction" (Nelson and Shavitt 2002: 440).

We live in an intensely driven and dynamic society—a life, in the words of Tocqueville, of fervor. But while this is clear, it is also true that we seldom stop to think and analyze what exactly we are after and why. Instead, we subject ourselves with little awareness to the profound demands that our society imposes on us. As Liah Greenfeld recently put it, we are overwhelmed by "busyness" but lack understanding: convinced that the "sky is the limit" and conscious that it is our duty to "find" if not "make" ourselves, we are breathlessly running from task to task, place to place, and mission to mission (Greenfeld 2005a: 331). Max Weber wrote that our Puritan ancestors taught us that idleness is a sin (Weber 2002). One could say that we learned that lesson all too well. We have been running ever since even if—as Weber himself predicted—so much has changed around us.

Nothing represents our restless and confused mentality better, perhaps, than our great love of "winning" and deep fear of "losing." Americans embrace competition. According to the World Values Survey,¹ as [table 1.1](#) shows, our approval of competition is unmatched by any other major industrialized country on earth. Nearly half of our population firmly believes in the goodness of competition. This is much more than the numbers in Germany, Great Britain, and Italy. It is twice the number in France. In Japan, less than one fifth of the population values competition decisively. The figure for Denmark is 27 percent. Indeed, when we consider the whole world, the United States is more positively inclined toward competition than most countries—a fact that is well established among comparative psychologists and sociologists (Nelson and Shavitt 2002). As we shall see throughout this book, Americans also believe more strongly than others in the fairness of unequal outcomes, rewarding those who try and succeed, and leaving those who fall behind to their own devices.

At the same time, despite all this and the pressures it generates, *we have remarkably little understanding of what competition—and winning and losing in particular—are all about.* We use the terms with different and sometimes contradictory, but never explicit, connotations and meanings. We often think of winning as the opposite of losing, but we are unsure about how the two concepts relate to each other. We push ourselves, congratulate winners, and console losers—all without knowing why. Indeed, we are not even clear about what, exactly, we are after on any given occasion. Winning and losing have become "taken for granted" aspects of our "everyday reality" about which we know much too little (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 19–21).

TABLE 1.1

EMBRACING COMPETITION

We should pause and analyze. According to the World Values Survey, the Danes, with their apparently odd approach to life, rank among the most satisfied and happiest people on earth—well ahead of the United States on both counts.² According to a recent comparative study of forty-two nations across the world, happiness decreases as the level of competition increases in a given society (Van de Vliert and Janssen 2002). The United States cannot and should not turn into a Denmark, of course. We are too diverse a society and our approach generates valuable benefits. But those reports suggest that something may be amiss in our mind-set.

The purpose of this book is to explore in detail our ideas of winning and losing. The task is certainly challenging. Tangible things in life, like bicycles or telephones, are relatively easy to take apart and study. With some effort, we come to understand their makeup: their components, how they are put together, and so on. But the values, ideas, and concepts that frame or underpin our societies are more difficult to deconstruct. They are invisible and cannot be held. They are nowhere in a sense, yet also everywhere. We can say that they exist in the minds of people. We can also say, however, that they have an independence of their own and exist separately from each individual consciousness (Durkheim 1965: 269). How, then, should we carry out our investigation of winning and losing?

For guidance, we can turn to the foundational works in sociology of Georg Simmel and Max Weber. They offered two different but complementary methodologies for examining life in society. According to Simmel, social life takes on particular forms (Levine 1971). We come to know any given social phenomenon when we understand how it is ordered or set up: What elements are at play? How do they relate to each other? Who gives what to whom? Parents, for instance, are authoritative figures who provide love and protection to their children. Those children reciprocate by giving their parents joy and affection. Prostitution, in turn, entails an exchange of money and sex between two individuals with asymmetrical power. Simmel urged us to look at the structure of things.

Weber, by contrast, thought that we should pay far more attention to what goes on inside people's minds. People interpret themselves and the world around them. They endow things with significance. Understanding something in society is best done by grasping the meaning it holds for its members (Runciman 1978). If, for instance, we see a mother buying an ice cream for her daughter on the first day of summer, we can understand what is happening when we discover that the mother is motivated in part by memories of her own mother doing the same thing for her years ago. For Weber, our attention should go to what people make of things—to the attributions and thought processes they bring to the world around them.

Both approaches inspired my investigation of winning and losing in America. In line with Simmel, I examine two fundamental aspects of winning and losing. Both have to do with what is at stake or what we *pursue* when we seek victory and try to avoid loss: What prizes do we get or give up? Second, what powers does victory give us over those prizes? How does loss limit us? These are structural questions—they are about the way winning and losing are set up in our society. The answers will reveal a great deal about the hidden qualities of victory and losing as well as what moves us to pursue victory and dread loss so passionately. [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) explore the prizes. [Chapter 5](#) focuses on power.

In line with Weber, I explore how we conceive of winners and losers—how we think of them and therefore make them into what they are. Who, in our minds, is a winner? Who is a loser? What do we believe a person must do to earn those titles? Moreover, how do we think about competitive

events and the world in general that allows for the existence of winners and losers as well as for their central position in our culture? We are interested in our *beliefs* about the constitutions of winners, losers, and the world around us. This will be the topic of [chapters 6](#) through [9](#). We will cover much ground. [Figure 1.1](#) summarizes the road ahead. Above all, the analysis will make clear one fundamental fact about winning and losing: they are not endpoints or final destinations but gateways to something of immense importance to us. This is *the affirmation of our place in the world*. We desperately wish to know that we belong to this earth and society—that our presence is legitimate. This doubt is characteristic of modern societies but especially the United States (Greenfeld 2005a, 2005b). Americans, according to the World Values Survey, are among the most preoccupied people in the world about the meaning and purpose of their lives.³ We are an unsettled people. Behind the drive toward “perfectibility” that Tocqueville saw in America one finds *profound doubt*. In victory we hope to find a positive answer to our questions. In loss, we fear rejection and, with that, the abyss.

Our investigation will also make clear that, unfortunately, we are bound to be disappointed over and over again—regardless of whether we win or lose. This is because, as we compete, we are not aware of what we are really after. It is also because we rely on arbitrary and faulty or inconsistent logic to assess the world around us, to draw conclusions about others and ourselves, to motivate us and interpret events and outcomes. All this creates problems. The intensity of our drives, coupled with our ignorance about what we are doing, ensures that we have a very *obsessive* or compulsive (Fellman 1998) relationship to competition: one that is marked by strong urges, repetitive but never satisfied behaviors, and a continuous need to produce evidence about ourselves.

Figure 1.1. Exploring winning and losing in America.

The bulk of this book is descriptive. But in the last chapter I pursue a very normative question: Should we continue to embrace the language of winning and losing in our everyday life? If winning and losing have become “inflationary” and are, at the same time, very messy concepts, is this not an indication that the time has come to reassess our use of those concepts? Are we depriving ourselves of more appropriate language, of sounder and therefore healthier attitudes toward so many different situations and events in life? Is our approach ultimately *inefficient*? I will propose that there are advantages but also serious problems associated with our current approach to winning and losing. Thus I will close by proposing an alternative mind-set for how we pursue our aspirations and dreams.

I shall end this chapter with three caveats. First, our investigation will not be exhaustive. While the task before us is of the most serious nature, I do not intend to offer a conclusive description of winning and losing backed by a comprehensive set of data. We know too little about those terms for that to be possible. My objective is to offer an initial *portrait* of winning and losing as they exist in our society—to identify some of their most important qualities. This book is not a treatise but an “intervention,” an exploration. As I proceed, I draw from an eclectic range of data sources and various modes of argumentation to make my point.⁴ The reader looking for provoking and powerful insights will encounter good material for further reflection.

Second, I do not intend to describe how all of us—individually or as members of particular socioeconomic, racial, gender, or other groups—think about winning and losing. There are, of course, important differences across individuals and groups. Some readers will not identify with what the discussion will unveil. Other readers, such as myself, will recognize (perhaps hesitantly) parts of themselves in it. What lies ahead is a particular type of sociological effort. My mission is to shed light on a set of powerful concepts *that occupy a dominant place* in our society and which, by

virtue of their privileged position, are incessantly before us as we go about our everyday life. To use the language of Berger and Luckmann, this is a book about two socially constructed ideas that have firmly taken roots in our society and which many, though not all of us, accept without question (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 19–21). We are after what Emil Durkheim called “social facts” that mold in a multitude of ways our reality (Durkheim 1982: 70).

Third, we shall focus on the characteristics of winning and losing, not how those concepts originate from, are maintained by, or stand in relation to broader societal factors. What roles do our political system, professional and nonprofessional sports leagues, education system, and economy—to name a few of those factors—play in the making of our competitive mind-sets? Do they benefit from our preoccupation with winning and fear of losing? Are there significant differences across contexts? I do not systematically answer these important questions. Still, given that I speak to them at various points in the book and that some readers may be looking for answers, I outline here my position.

When it comes to broader factors, we should pay special attention to institutions. Institutions are the formal and informal programs, rules, and practices found in our political, economic, athletic, educational, and other systems. We find them at our workplaces, leagues, the state, associations of various kinds, our schools, and beyond (Campbell 2004: i; Fligstein 1996: 658). Institutions are especially responsible for fostering, supporting, and making possible our approach to winning and losing. Research should turn to institutions when investigating the broader context of our competitive mind-sets. By and large, the organizations, associations, and systems that house those institutions benefit from what they produce: individuals are encouraged to give far more of themselves to any given cause than is reasonable or healthy. More of everything is therefore generated—goods, services, professional and athletic achievements, money, entertainment, to name a few. Matters are unlikely to change fast: institutions are sticky (Mahoney 2000) and cannot be easily dismissed, although each context is likely to have unique dynamics at work. In all of this, individuals clearly find themselves in difficult circumstances. The most promising path for them to follow is a change in their own personal perspectives, as I argue in the closing chapter of the book.

PART 2

The Pursuit

Chapter Two DIFFERENTIATION

What a way to win, as well, with my

brother so close behind me.

—John Grossman, on winning the 2003

World Surf Kayaking Championship

VICTORY IN AND OF ITSELF is not necessarily what brings us satisfaction. If that were the case, most of us would put ourselves in situations where we would be assured of beating our competitors. Chess masters would play with five-year-olds and professional golfers with people who do not know the difference between a golf club and a walking stick. Instead, quite the opposite happens: we take steps to ensure that we participate in competitive events where we face off against competitors of near equal skill or ability and where the outcome is, therefore, uncertain. In this and the next two chapters, I explore what is behind our love of winning and distaste for loss. What prizes are motivating us?

In this chapter, I identify a set of subtle and somewhat darker things: uncertainty, the thrill of

seeing but then avoiding danger, the pleasures that come from seeing others struggle, and above all, the possibility of differentiating ourselves from our closest peers. Close competition provides all of these. We as a society have, therefore, devoted enormous resources, and crafted rules and practices—whether in business, sports, education, or other areas—to ensure that competitive events remain close. The Competitors

Victory itself is not very interesting. What gives it special flavor is close competition. Without close competition, very few of us would be eager to compete. So, how does close competition make victory thrilling? [Figure 2.1](#) specifies the dynamics at work. Consider each step in turn. Close competition increases the risk of loss. The resulting uncertainty gives victory part of its flavor. We can recall here the words of French sociologist Roger Caillois who, in his classic study of competition and games, stated that “the game is no longer pleasing to one who, because he is too well trained or skillful, wins effortlessly and infallibly” (Caillois 2001: 7). We must be running a risk. If things go wrong, we will find ourselves in an undesirable position; if things go well, on the other hand, we will be quite happy. Because we do not know the outcome yet, we feel excitement. Social psychologists have known this for quite some time: “unpredictability,” note two researchers, “is important in creating the tension and excitement for the participants and spectators” (Frazier and Snyder 1991: 380). And “doubt,” if at all possible, “must remain until the end,” so as to create the maximum excitement (Caillois 2001: 7). But what causes uncertainty? One factor is our opponent. We are facing a partly unknown challenge, one that is potentially bigger than we can handle. Only engagement with that challenge will reveal the truth. A second, perhaps more important cause, is ourselves. To return to Caillois’ insight, we know that we are not infallible: “Every game of skill, by definition, involves the risk for the player of missing his stroke, and the threat of defeat, without which the game would no longer be pleasing” (Caillois 2001: 7). We are capable of making mistakes and hurting ourselves. The challenge becomes to see how we perform. We choose situations, then, that test our abilities. We can certainly run faster than a five-year-old. But can we run as fast as our peers?

Figure 2.1. Close competition and the thrill of victory.

The risk of loss generates other dynamics as well. We must struggle and exert ourselves in order to overcome the odds. We have to labor for the desired outcome. We must, in other words, make an effort. Such effort implies that we have invested a part of ourselves, that we have taken time to gather our energy, to concentrate, to turn our attention to the task before us. We have not only spent part of ourselves but also dedicated our minds to it. Loss becomes painful because of all that we have invested. Winning vindicates us. Rewards, then, are available only for those who have struggled. And, in fact, psychology experiments confirm this much. In one study, for instance, researchers found that progress in attaining certain objectives at the workplace caused feelings of self-esteem only when those objectives were deemed *difficult* to attain. “Goal difficulty,” wrote the researchers, “emerged as the clearest moderator between goal progress and well-being over a period of 3 years” (Wiese and Freund 2005: 298). The attainment of easy goals generates no real pleasure. Other researchers reported more generally that for most people the attainment of hard goals generates more pride and self-respect than is the case for easier goals (Mento et al. 1992).

The effort-reward mentality is quite central to American culture and its roots. According to the General Social Survey—the most authoritative and comprehensive source of attitudes in our country—75 percent of Americans believe effort to be an essential driver of one’s social standing.¹ Success, they believe, requires and reflects hard work. Our mythologies, in turn, are heavily preoccupied with the close relationship between effort and rewards. Think of Ulysses’ adventures in *The Odyssey*: they are a sequence of challenges and obstacles that are overcome through courage and skill. Ulysses’ reunion with his wife Penelope and Penelope’s own faithfulness in the

face of doubt and pressure from numerous suitors are deeply meaningful because of their travails. Tellingly, once back, Ulysses uses a celebratory banquet to get rid of those who, in his absence, had aspired to marry Penelope and replace him in his own home: close competitors indeed! When it comes to Christianity, only those who heed the word of God and avoid doing evil are granted salvation. Eve in the Garden of Eden could not resist temptation: God deemed her unworthy and sent her and Adam away. Since then, all humans have come into this world burdened with original sin. They must toil to survive on this earth: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake," said God to Adam; "in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life" (Genesis 3). And, of course, they must cleanse themselves to reach the heavens.

The second element in [figure 2.1](#) follows closely from the first. Victory confirms for us that, *even though we could have lost*, we have in fact won. We delight in not having lost, with all the terrible consequences that that can bring. Insofar as this is the case, victory is then a sensation of pleasure based, in part, on something that has not taken place: we stand by the abyss that we previously saw and delight in the idea that we have not fallen into it. Without the abyss, the delight would not be there. In terms of uncertainty, victory is then the *elimination* of that doubt. Note, therefore, that the pleasure comes not from the mere absence of that doubt but, rather, from its acknowledged presence and, in a later moment, its deletion. It is the sequence—doubt and then no doubt—that causes pleasure.

There are plenty of studies that show that inordinate pleasure can come from seeing danger and then avoiding it. In a recent experiment measuring the pleasure associated with winning and losing, students at Ohio State University were put before a computer and allowed to gamble money. Outcomes were fixed, so that all participants neither lost nor made money. Yet the paths to those outcomes were different. One group of students was in positive territory until the end. The other was in negative territory until the end. Which group reported the most overall pleasure from the experiment? The one that was losing throughout and then saw the losses go away (Heyman et al. 2004). But we need not turn to experiments to understand this process. The logic is embedded in many of our daily activities and social rituals.

What happens, after all, when we take a shot at a basket? If we knew beforehand that we would make the shot, we would be less interested in taking it. Michael Jordan said on many occasions that he took each shot with the conviction that he would make it. But this cannot possibly explain the joy he displayed on so many occasions when making the shot. The possibility of failure, confirmed by more than 9,000 missed shots and a career's percentage of shots made from the field of 47 percent, had to be always in his mind (Reilly 2002). The realization that he avoided a negative outcome in turn surely was at least part of the pleasure. Much the same can be said of the ritual that takes place every spring with high school students opening their admission letters from the various colleges to which they have applied. The anxiety that mounts in the days before the letters arrive is by and large fueled by students imagining rejection letters in their hands: "What would a rejection from that college say about me, my intelligence, how I rank in the world of my fellow peers?" The arrival of positive news erases those memories and provides much welcome relief. "I am not that person," the student feels, "but rather this smart, interesting person." Parents as well experience positive feelings out of the confirmation that their child is, indeed, not a "failure." Even the best of parents, with the best of children, harbor their doubts and rejoice when the good news erases their fears.²

And the same can be said of what happens at the workplace, in the business world, and elsewhere. When we await a job offer, work hard to launch a new company, or wait for end-of-year bonus decisions, we entertain negative outcomes. We engage in thought experiments, contemplating the consequences of failure. What will I do if I receive no offer to join the company? What will a failed business say about me and what I am capable of? How will I communicate to my spouse that I received the smallest bonus in the firm? We work hard to avoid those outcomes. We train, read

helpful books, devote extra hours, and sacrifice precious time with families and friends. When good news comes, part of its significance is that we will not have to hear bad news that would make our efforts and sacrifices seem futile.³

The third and final component of this process is perhaps the most important. The great psychologist Erik Erikson explored in detail the importance of *differentiation* between human beings. Identity for groups and individuals alike is created not so much by an independent process of self-definition. Rather, it is attained by somehow asserting that we are different from someone else: that we belong to a class or group of people that stands apart from other classes or groups. The very fact of standing apart from someone else *is* what defines us. Erikson calls this tendency toward separation “pseudospeciation”—the artificial (i.e., human-made) setting of boundaries among people: *

Most of us are taught from a young age to be winners and avoid being losers. But what does it mean to win or lose? And why do we care so much? Does winning make us happy? *Winning* undertakes an unprecedented investigation of winning and losing in American society, what we are really after as we struggle to win, our collective beliefs about winners and losers, and much more.

Francesco Duina argues that victory and loss are not endpoints or final destinations but gateways to something of immense importance to us: the affirmation of our place in the world. But Duina also shows that competition is unlikely to provide us with the answers we need. Winning and losing are artificial and logically flawed concepts that put us at odds with the world around us and, ultimately, ourselves. Duina explores the social and psychological effects of the language of competition in American culture.

Primarily concerned with our shared obsessions about winning and losing, *Winning* proposes a new mind-set for how we can pursue our dreams, and, in a more satisfying way, find our proper place in the world.

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