

## Winning at Any Price?

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### Readings

from the *Bhagavad Gita*

You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for inaction. Perform work in this world as one established within oneself – without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat.

They are forever free who renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of “I,” “me,” and “mine” to be united with the Lord. This is the supreme state.

The ignorant work for their own profit; the wise work for the welfare of the world, without thought for themselves.

from Vaclav Havel’s speech to Congress 1989

*As many of you will recall, Vaclav Havel was a renowned playwright in Czechoslovakia who, in the 1970s, was jailed by the communist regime for two essays he had written in opposition to that regime. In 1989 he became the first president of the newly democratic Czech government. Invited to give a speech to a joint session of Congress, here is some of what he said:*

Consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists say. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human modesty, and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our Being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed, whether it be ecological, social, demographic, or a general breakdown of civilization, will be unavoidable... Interests of all kinds – personal, selfish, state, national, group, and, if you like, company interests – still considerably outweigh genuinely common and global interests... We are still destroying the planet that was entrusted to us... We still don’t know how to put morality ahead of politics, science, and economics. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine core of all our actions – if they are to be moral – is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success. Responsibility to the order of Being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged. The interpreter or mediator between us and this higher authority is what is traditionally referred to as human conscience. If I subordinate my political behavior to this imperative, I can’t go far wrong. If, on the contrary, I am not guided by this voice, not even ten presidential schools with two thousand of the best political scientists in the world could help me.

## Sermon

Winning at any price?

There are so many places I could begin. There are so many examples just in recent days or weeks of people seduced by the siren call of winning to engage in outright cheating at worst, to sacrificing conscience at best.

Baseball to begin with, with spring training around the corner. Is winning a World Series really so important that over the course of an entire season you break the rules against using electronic means to steal signs from the catcher? Apparently the Houston Astros thought so, including our now former Red Sox manager Alex Cora, who was a coach of the Astros during their 2017 World Series victory year – and who is still under investigation for allegedly managing a similar scheme during the 2018 Red Sox World Series year. And though the Red Sox allegations do remain under investigation, it is clear that Cora and many others among Astros leaders and players, did indeed somehow justify to themselves this breaking of the rules in the service of an edge over other teams... an edge that may well have led to their World Series trophy.

And there are so many examples in so many sports – from rule bending or breaking in baseball or football to cheating by using banned substances in running or bicycling to the entire Russian Olympic team being banned from this year’s Olympics for their cheating.

Is winning really that important?

As a teenager, for a couple of years I apparently thought so, somehow convinced myself that fudging my golf scores was okay (“oh, I should have made that putt so I’ll score it as if I did...”).

Why did I think it was so important to have a score a few shots better than my true score? To impress other kids? To please my parents? Who, after I tearfully, agonizingly owned up to my golfing sin, still loved me! Didn’t I already know that? Didn’t I know that their love had nothing to do with how good a golfer or how good an anything I was?

Well, as partial explanation, though not excuse, I had been suckered by an entire American culture, if not creed, of winning – as football coach Vince Lombardi famously (or infamously) once said, “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.”

When it comes to athletics, this entirely neglects the deeper and, actually, beautiful virtue of fair competition: to test the athletes, to bring out the best in each competitor.

We see this virtue manifest when teams shake hands after a game, saying “good game...” down the line.

Or, even for the weekend player after a seemingly never-ending point in tennis, when both opponents, no matter who finally won the point, look at each other and marvel at the amazing rally they had just participated in.

Or when the winner of a road race turns to greet the competitor she has just vanquished and shakes hands or embraces – maybe saying something like “great race” or “you really pushed me out there – thank you!”.

When our son ran cross country at Hingham High, I recall vividly the way in which the entire team would wait, however long it took, for the final, slowest competitor to cross the line, cheering whole-heartedly as they labored up the steepest hill at World’s End, doing their best just as the winner had done many minutes earlier.

And I am moved each year by the cheering along Commonwealth Avenue for Boston Marathon runners as we make our way up Heartbreak Hill an hour or two after the Kenyans or whomever had crossed the finish line first.

In short, winning is *not* everything, and certainly not the only thing when it comes to athletic competition. What a twisted view!

Even less so in the world of politics is winning at the expense of others the only thing.

Those words of Vaclav Havel have nothing to do with “winning” as we usually think of winning, one individual or one team or one group or one nation getting the better of another. If he was talking about victory at all, he was talking about the victory of conscience over selfishness, putting (as he said) morality ahead of politics or anything else: “responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success.”

Conscience: “If I subordinate my political behavior to this imperative, I can’t go far wrong,” he said.

In recent days we observed at least one politician, surprising some of us, rise to conscience and principle over politics. This would be Utah’s senator, our former governor Mitt Romney – criticized over the years for his flip-flops which seemingly had it backwards, politics over principle.

I watched a video of Romney’s entire speech on the floor of the senate as he described how he had come to his decision to vote to convict the president of his own party on the article having to do with abuse of power. It was quite simple actually. Romney said, with real emotion, that his religious faith called him to examine his conscience, and then to vote accordingly.

He wasn’t saying that God had somehow told him to vote to acquit; rather, he affirmed that his understanding and experience of God called him to his own discernment of conscience – Havel’s “something higher” – which is what Romney then did, naming the overwhelming evidence of our president’s wrongdoing leading him to vote to convict.

I was among those surprised by this politician, having become used to his too often seeming just to bend with the political winds. And I was moved.

Winning – neither everything or the only thing, not even, maybe not especially, in politics.

Which brings me to the passage we heard from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

(And if nothing else, this passage from well over two thousand years ago from a non-western tradition reminds us that the challenges of being human haven’t changed much over the centuries, over millennia for that matter, even as so much else has changed – science, technology, social arrangements, and on and on.)

Now, as some of you know, the brief passage we heard is part of the conversation between the warrior Arjuna and his charioteer, who fortuitously happens to be Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu. (We should all be so lucky!)

Here’s the context for their conversation: Arjuna had become immobilized by doubt as a great battle approached, consumed by the knowledge that he has family relations on both sides of the battlefield, therefore certain that the battle would mean the end of the social order, utter chaos.

Krishna gradually convinces Arjuna that his doubt and worry emerge from a fundamental misunderstanding of who we are as human beings and of what his, Arjuna’s particular role is, what his duty is – in general and at this specific moment.

The message in the lines we heard?

Krishna tells Arjuna he must be established in himself – which means to know who he most *truly* is, who in fact we each most truly are: namely not only individual ego-bound selves, but part of the larger whole of humanity, of life. And as part of the whole, each of us with our particular role to play, not for the sake of winning, success as the world measures, for selfish ends – rather to do our duty, working for the welfare of the world. As we heard Vaclav Havel put it centuries upon centuries later, demonstrating “responsibility to something higher... conscience.”

In other words, the idea of winning as the measure of success, as the only thing, comes from a profound misunderstanding of who we are.

Now, as you've heard, the setting for the *Bhagavad Gita* is a battlefield. So how is it that the 20<sup>th</sup> century apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, considered the *Gita* his primary scripture and guide? Quite simple: He understood that the *Gita's* battlefield was the battlefield of our lives, our souls, as we struggle to overcome selfish desire in order to serve the larger good. Simple as that – not easy of course, but simple.

The good news is that many among us get this. The culture at large may say winning is the highest goal, and all too many politicians live by this as their creed; but I think most people in their heart of hearts know otherwise, whether athletes, politicians, or the rest of us – appearances and current events often to the contrary.

Even more and more businesses and corporations are coming to see this wisdom and are striving to act accordingly.

I often pour oat milk on my morning cereal. Comes from a company called, appropriately, Oatly. On one side of the container is a statement titled "Here's what we believe." Among other things, here's what it says:

Everybody – regardless of spiritual beliefs, birth country, race, gender, sexual orientation or color of their nail polish – is of equal worth. The reckless pursuit of profits without any consideration for the well-being of the planet and the humans that live here should be considered a crime. Companies have as much responsibility as politicians for building a society the rest of the world can admire.

How about that! That suggests a model for success I can admire.

So: Short sermon? Winning – of one individual over another, one business over another, one party over another, one nation over another – as the ultimate measure of success in life is ultimately utterly empty when it comes to any real and enduring measure of the worth of a life or of a nation.

Yes, it is natural and human to seek to care first for our families and communities; and this means we will sometimes face challenging decisions as to where to put our efforts or our money or our vote.

But, even so, how paltry a measure of success – worse, perverse and twisted – if we believe success is only possible at the expense of another, only possible by demeaning another, only possible by smearing or devaluing another!

For we know the real measures – which have to do with conscience, with compassion, with the larger good. We know the real measures have to do with drawing the circle of inclusion and concern ever wider: all people, all nations, all life – to put it another way, to reclaim the word: *everyone* winning.

So may it be.