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A Psychotheology of Losing

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Abstract

This paper explores what it means to lose in a contemporary American society. Kanter (2004) suggested that losing serves as an alarm, notifying one that it is time to recalibrate. For Duina (2011) losing offers a time for reexamination. Sports equates to winning and losing. Thanks to well-indoctrinated maxims like Lombardi's "winning is the only thing" and a cultural rejection of "losers" we are in an era where the pursuit of winning trumps other variables which are also worthy of pursuit and consideration. Thus, losing becomes an insult to our ego-driven lives. As such, one cannot discuss losing without also considering what it means to win. Losing is not simply the opposite of winning; a relationship exists between the two, although this is seldom recognized in the broader American culture. After the relationship between winning and losing is established, the paper will pivot to psychosocial aspects associated with losing, investigating the unique cognitive and affective experience related to losing. Social dynamics such as gender differences, will also be explored. Additionally, the paper will explore some underlying physiological explanations as to why individuals react the way they do to winning and losing. Finally, a consideration of the theology of losing will be discussed. Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to encourage us to consider losing and how it fits within the Christian worldview.

Keywords: Winning, Losing, Success, Failure

A Psychotheology of Losing

"It is a misconception to say that Texas ... is obsessed with football. It is obsessed with winning football. As long as they win, players and coaches are endowed with a stature normally reserved for war heroes and holy men ... the identities, egos, and libidos of whole communities go with them ... And when they lose? ... Local fans [have] expressed their ire by making anonymous death threats."

- J. Henderson, Gannett Center Journal, 1987

Losing can be devastating. From Vince Lombardi and Jackie Robinson to Tony La Russa and Tim Tebow, individuals inside and outside of sport have an armchair philosophy on losing. Vin Scully famously said, "Losing feels worse than winning feels good." Michener (1976) quoted Redskins coach George Allen as saying, "... when you lose, you die a little" (p. 421). Bill Simmons, a one-time sports blogger turned TV personality formerly of ESPN, spent a decade creating his "Sixteen Levels of Losing" in an attempt to organize, in his mind, how much losing affects sport fans (Simmons, 2002, 2007). For Simmons, losing can be quantified by the amount of mental pain it causes, ranging from small pains, as illustrated with "The Princeton Principle" (i.e., an underdog does well, exciting the masses, yet loses in the end) to large, life-defining pains, which Simmons titles "That Game", citing Game 6 of the 1986 World Series for Red Sox fans as a vivid example.

An important element of consideration is the response of a Christian to losing. Paradoxically, the very mission of Christ was one of losing (Foster, 2012): if one wants to gain his life, he must first lose it (Matthew 16:25); the greatest among you must become the least (Matthew 20:26); the first must become the last (Mark 9:35); what value if a man gains the whole world but loses his soul (Matthew 16:26); the Creator of the universe died a criminal's death but by doing so conquered death itself. Contrast that attitude with the Hebrews writer encouraging us to continually run with the end in sight, or Paul telling the Corinthians to run the race as if to win. Perhaps Paul had encouragement in mind when he reminded the Ephesians that our battle is not against flesh and blood. Some translations render this battle as "wrestling" or "fighting". If we are in a battle, there will be winners and losers. Paul would argue that this is a wrestling match that the Christian simply cannot lose.

One cannot discuss losing without also discussing winning. To that point, Duina (2011) warned against a simple assumption of contrast (i.e., winning as the opposite of losing) challenging us to consider not just the apparent polar nature of winning and losing but also the relationship between the two. For the most part, this counsel has not been heeded. Research, pop culture, and media have spent much time, both contemporarily and historically, discussing, theorizing, and explaining winning, often at the expense of developing a comprehensive understanding of losing. Ideally, winning and losing should be kept in perspective, but this is rarely the case. Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989) argued that "at the center of the American value system is the value of success" (p. 206). Such a statement implies that success, as measured by winning, is a central theme rooted in Americana and playing out in the contemporary American society. Cawelti (1965) contended that this "success ethic" has historical roots as deep and long as the Protestant work ethic hailing from the Puritan era of American history, although secular America was initially at the forefront of the success movement. Winning, being a winner, win at all costs, etc. has become the mantra of modern sports to such an extent that an extensive amount of ink and words have been given towards "building a winning culture" or "having a winning attitude" without much critical reflection on the other end of the spectrum, namely, losing. Even reflected in American society's estimation of "rightness", winning can be a telltale sign that "we" are right and "they" are wrong. Additionally, self-esteem and worthiness as people has been tied to winning sporting events, particularly at the international level (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993). Dunia identified 10 overarching reasons why we want to win:

1. Think that we are special.
2. Think that we are not of the same standing as everyone else.
3. Think that we are smarter than everyone else.
4. Fancy ourselves better than the rest.
5. Think we know more than the rest.
6. Think we are more important than everyone else.

7. Think that we are good at something.
8. Laugh at others.
9. Believe that others care about us.
10. Think that we have something to teach.

Runciman (1978) reflected the venerable sociologist Max Weber by stating, “understanding something in society is best done by grasping the meaning it holds for its members ... our attention should go to what people make of things – to the attributions and thought processes they bring to the world around them” (p. 7). The intent of this paper is to explore what it means to the American society, in particular, to lose. This is approached from two primary perspectives: psychological meaning and theological meaning. In trying to capture the complexity of losing, other physiological, social, and moral factors will also be considered.

Overview of the Relationship between Winning and Losing

Even the thrill of winning is based, in part, on losing. Francesco Duina, a sociologist who ties winning and losing to the very heart of the American Dream – work hard against extreme competition to reach one’s goals – argued that victory in and of itself is not particularly rewarding. If it were, competitors would be content to compete (and win) against much inferior opponents. For Duina (2011), the competition against equal or greater rivals is what makes winning more satisfying for the competitors, spectators, and society as a whole; when the possibility of losing is more acute and realistic, competition becomes more intense, enjoyable, and is engaged in more thoroughly. Without the threat of losing, the thrill of winning is diminished. Because the outcome against equally matched opponents is unknown, with losing serving as a distinct possibility, competitors are more motivated to perform well. Competitors make a concerted effort to seek out situations in which they can test their own abilities against peers who may or may not be better. If the competitor wins, his/her efforts in training, preparation, and execution are justified; if s/he loses, because of the investment made, the loss is agonizing. Dunia stated,

“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” (p. 18).

For winning to be meaningful, it needs its counterpart of losing. This applies to the individual competitors, spectators of the event (Gan, Tuggle, Mitrook, Coussement, & Zillmann, 1997), and even society itself (Dunia, 2011). Losing might even lead to winning (Berger & Pope, 2011). In a study of 18,000

professional and 45,000 collegiate basketball games, Berger and Pope discovered that being slightly behind at halftime (“losing” the first half) is more predictive of winning the game than being slightly ahead at halftime.

Dunia (2011) identified four basic forms of winning and losing in the American culture: 1) *Physical ownership*, in which competitors challenge each other for a tangible prize such as a trophy or money. Victory provides a tangible prize while losers are denied the same prize, giving life to the old proverb, “to the victor goes the spoils”. Losers forfeit the right to own the prize. They are left, therefore, to maintain the status quo, forced to abandon dreams of what they might have done with their winnings. This provides one example of how winning and losing is not always an opposite, zero-sum game. As Dunia stated, “while winning means acquiring ownership of a physical object, loss need not be about losing ownership of a physical object” (p. 82). Of course, there are many instances which can be cited in which the loser does forfeit tangible property to the winner, with the NHL’s Stanley Cup serving as a realistic example, or the loser of World War II in which the Axis lost territory it had previously conquered; 2) Competitors fight for *access*. While not necessarily sport specific, this form of winning results in the victor being privy to a seat at a play (by “winning” a bid on eBay) or winning custody of children. The loser is left without. This can be painful for the loser if s/he is forced to renounce something important (like custody of a child). However, ownership is not transferred in this case (even in the case of winning custody of a child, one does not win ownership of that child); 3) winners get *control*. This may happen via a war or a simple interpersonal argument, and while the victor may gain possessions, s/he does not own the war. In this case, what was won (like an argument or war) no longer exists in a tangible way. Instead of the exchange of property, winners benefit while losers do not, and the loser could find him/herself worse off than prior to the engagement; and 4) *intangible ownership*, which could result in rights (e.g., the civil rights movement), titles/honors (e.g., employee of the month), or increased market share (e.g., Apples’ dominance in the mp3 player market) going to the winner while the loser is, again, left without. This type tends to be more ego-driven because only certain individuals (or organizations) can make the abstract claim of being the best. Losing intangible ownership might mean that one misses out on privileges offered to the winner, such as the “loser” of the employee of the month not getting to park in the best parking spot. Losers must accept that they do not have access to the intangible object, but at the same time accept the validity of that intangible object. If the object is not “worth winning”, then the loss has little meaning. In the end, whether one wins or loses, his/her relationship with the world is altered.

Psychosocial Aspects of Losing

There exists a particular cognitive and affective experience related to losing, manifesting itself in a number of ways, including initial levels of self-esteem and egotism (Zhang & Baumeister, 2006), ethical decision making (Schurr & Ritov, 2016), confidence (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992), a sense of social ideology (Hall & Lindbom, 1999; McPherson, 2004), depression (Price, Sloman, Gardner, Gilbert, & Rohde, 1994), attributions for success/failure (Zientek & Breakwell, 1991), and cohesion (Boone, Beitel, & Kuhlman, 1997). Emotional experiences and expression have been shown to happen in both the competitor and the spectators of the event. Duina (2011) summarized the emotional experience, “Losers feel empty, spent, finished. They question ... their worthiness, cognitive abilities, judgment, physical skills, and prowess” (p. 37). Available evidence tends to affirm the validity of this point.

Zhang and Baumeister (2006), in a series of four economic theory experiments, determined that when one’s view of him/herself is threatened, s/he is more likely to engage in self-defeating behavior which ultimately increases the odds of losing. When self-esteem was threatened, individuals lost more money regardless of whether the “game” was based on chance and luck, skill and ability, or interpersonal competition. Simply put, when self-esteem was on the line, the attempt to preserve it cost money. The researchers postulated that since self-esteem is theoretically tied to optimism and confidence, the likelihood that these traits also play a role is strong. Optimism may in fact work against a competitor because s/he might be slower at evaluating the need to make changes, what changes need to be made, or how to make the necessary changes during the competition. When things are going well, one tends to be more optimistic and less likely to anticipate the necessity of reevaluation and refinement in procedure or protocol, making one more susceptible to failure and lose once an unknown or unexpected twist occurs in the competitive narrative.

Unlike self-esteem, research in economics suggested that ethical decision making might not be compromised by losing. Schurr and Ritov (2016) completed five studies which indicated that losers were less likely to act dishonestly during subsequent behavior after the competition than winners. Referencing the recent Volkswagen scandal, the authors noted that during competition, competitors will sometimes engage in unethical behaviors in an effort to increase their odds of success. With a bevy of evidence suggesting that unethical behavior will also take place prior to a competition, Schurr and Ritov provided evidence that “cheating” can happen not only before and during competition but also after competition and on tasks that are completely unrelated to the competitive activity itself. Drawing a distinction between success and winning, the authors noted that this post-competition dishonesty only happened after winning. One possible mechanism for the unethical behavior, the authors discovered, was a sense of entitlement that comes following victory. Losers are less likely to display unethical behavior or a sense of entitlement following a loss.

Team cohesiveness in response to winning or losing has a long history. For example, using the popular Group Environment Questionnaire, Boone, Beitel, and Kuhlman (1997) investigated NCAA Division III baseball players' response to winning and losing. They found that for losing teams, their attraction to the group task (i.e., measuring attributes such as style of play and baseball philosophy) and group integration toward the task were significantly lower than teams who had won over the course of a season. Perhaps as revealing were findings with winning baseball teams: winning throughout the season did not change their perceptions of cohesion from initial measurement at the beginning of the season to the end of the season. In summary, losing affected the perceptions of cohesion, in a negative manner, while winning did not affect cohesion at all. Compared to previous research in this area, Boone et al.'s findings did not support the established assumption that winning enhanced cohesion; at best, winning maintained initial levels of cohesion but did not enhance the cohesive experience of the athletes.

Following a different line of inquiry, Pennebaker (2007) summarized much of his life's work on the benefits of expressing emotion in general, noting that when individuals cannot adequately express emotion through a medium such as writing or speaking, adverse health effects occur. Pennebaker argued that venting alone after experiencing a loss is not an adequate means of expression. If individuals cannot give the proper voice to express how losing makes them feel, they may experience significant health problems and increased medical utilization in the future. Although not sport specific, the implication from Pennebaker's work is that it may be less about losing itself, and more about how one expresses the emotions generated by losing. Baker-Ward, Eaton, and Banks (2005) complimented Pennebaker's findings by demonstrating that emotional experiences differed between winning and losing players on 10-year old soccer teams as expressed through post-game recall narratives. Losers were not as able to accurately describe their performance as the winners. Talarico and Moore (2012) explored a similar theme with fans. Investigating the storied annual Lehigh-Lafayette college football game, affectionately known as "The Rivalry", the researchers found that as time passed after the 2008 game in which Lafayette lost, Lafayette fans has a much lower emotional experience and were unable to recall the event as vividly as the winning fans from Lehigh could. Lehigh fans could more accurately recall facts about the game as time progressed. Finally, although not sport specific, addressing psychopathological emotional experience, Price et al. (1994) theorized about depression following a loss, stating "the depressive state evolved in relation to social competition, as an unconscious, involuntary losing strategy, enabling the individual to accept defeat in ritual agonistic encounters and to accommodate to what would otherwise be unacceptably low social rank" (p. 309).

Comparing Hungarians to Canadians and Japanese, Fulop (2009) and Fulop and Orosz (2015) explored the emotional responses and coping mechanisms to winning and losing. With the simple open-ended question, "what does winning/losing mean to you and

how do you react to it?" (p. 356), Fulop (2009) noted that specific reactions exist if one wins or loses. Roughly three-fourths of the time, one will experience joy and satisfaction when winning; these responses are countered with sadness and disappointment when losing. Perhaps most striking is the finding that how an individual responds to winning is highly predictive of how the same individual responds to losing. Emotional responses are also found in spectators. Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, and Kennedy (1992) examined mood and confidence levels in fans of winning and losing teams. Fans of teams who had recently experienced a loss had significantly more negative moods and lower expectations of their own future performance (not the performance of their team) on achievement tasks that were not sport skills. The interaction between personal success and success of one's sport team is fascinating and highlights the influence that losing by proxy has on one's psyche. The same Hirt et al. study found that fans of losing teams were even less likely to invite someone they found attractive to a concert than fans of winning teams. Evidence is mounting with other types of spectators, too. For example, parents with inappropriate coping mechanisms who tie their own worth to the success or failure of their children in sports will sometimes act out in obscene, violent, and entirely non-adult ways (Dunia, 2011); this phenomena has been well chronicled in pop culture and the mainstream media (see Dalton, 2001; Engh, 2002; Feigley, 1983; James & Ziemer, 2001; Still, 2001).

Considering social aspects of losing, there are pronounced cognitive and affective gender differences in response to losing. For example, Mills and D'Alfonso (2007), exploring the "threatened masculinity" theory, noted that males feel less muscular, and by extension experience a decrease in body image, after losing a competition to a female. In this particular study, perhaps the most captivating aspect was that the competition was not even sport or physical activity based; the researchers used a word game. Taking a step back, Bronson and Merryman (2013) submitted that the genders differ in their initial approach to competition, long before losing is even a possibility, noting that there is very little evidence that men and women differ in intensity towards competition, but they have found that despite being as ambitious as men once competition has begun, women do not engage in competition as readily as men do, thus decreasing their likelihood of losing, particularly if the odds are not in their favor. To illustrate from a non-athletic perspective, Fulton (2012) and Fulton, Maestas, Maisel, and Stone (2006) discovered that in political elections, men will run for office if they have any chance to win, but women will only run if they have a good chance to win. But at what odds? Fulton and her colleagues identified a ceiling of 80% - if a candidate has odds of greater than 80% to lose an election (or, said another way, less than 20% chance to win), the candidate will most likely be male. The better the odds of success, the more likely females were to engage in the activity. "Men will gamble on long odds – even stupid odds. Women won't" (Bronson & Merryman, 2012; p. 88). Women appear to be less likely to waste their time when losing is the likely outcome. Women are also more likely to hold more realistic

views about their own abilities – if the odds are poor and their ability is questionable, women are less likely to engage in the competition; men tend to ignore their odds and overestimate their abilities. Kumar (2010) found a similar pattern on Wall Street: women analysts, who are more risk adverse, were 7.3% more accurate in their projections (meaning they “lose” less). He concluded that in general, men were more likely to take on risky investments, and by natural extension increase the likelihood of losing. Finally, Bronson & Merryman stated that when people focus on their odds of losing, they are less likely to engage in the competitive activity; a growing body of research indicated that it is the women who more accurately assess odds, and it is the men who are more likely to engage in a potentially losing situation. Although thought-provoking, before conclusions can be drawn as to whether this trend holds true in sports, more research with sport specific methods need to be conducted. Also to be considered is why men and women differ in this way – are they socialized into it, or are there underlying physiological differences, perhaps differences in brain chemistry and hormonal considerations, that also need to be explored more fully.

Physiology of losing

Does losing stink because we have been conditioned to believe it to be so or is there an innate characteristic about losing that makes it unbearable for some? Some of the answers to this question might lie in our physiology.

Testosterone appears to be highly responsive to winning and losing in males (Archer, 2006). This holds true for participants and for bystanders. In a study with college hockey players, Carré and Putnam (2010) had the players watch themselves on video participating in previous victories and losses. The authors found that when the athletes watched a previous victory of themselves, there was corresponding significant surge in testosterone; watching a previous loss did not elicit the spike in testosterone. While research on males, because of their naturally high levels of testosterone, has dominated this line of inquiry, Oliveira, Gouveia, and Oliveira (2009) investigated testosterone responses in females. Examining Portuguese soccer players, the researchers found that levels of testosterone were increased above baseline in winners and decreased below baseline in losers as measured pregame to postgame. In addition to experienced hormonal changes, variations in mood and anxiety states (as measured by questionnaires) were also noted, with losers reporting more negative states on both measures at the end of the match, creating an interesting correlation between hormonal levels and psychological phenomena. Oliveria et al. suggested that the mood and anxiety responses might fuel the testosterone changes, and not the other way around, giving credence to the suggestion that one’s psychological response to losing drives the physiological response. Conversely, researchers such as Archer have argued that an increase in testosterone might encourage the participants to engage in the activity again, thus verifying an important aspect of losing – since losing does not induce a testosterone surge, losers might be less motivated to engage in a similar behavior in the future. In fact, Carré, Campbell, Lozoya,

Goetz, and Welker (2013) found this to be the case: following a win and its testosterone boost, men were more likely to engage in subsequent aggressive behaviors; losers did not.

Participants are not the only group who experience a biochemical change in response to losing. Bernhardt, Dabbs Jr, Fielden, and Lutter (1998) measured the vicarious experiences of fans in response to winning and losing. In two experiments, the researchers measured the testosterone levels of men following sporting events in which the men were invested as fans. In the first study, the researchers chose an event in which the fans were physically present for the sporting event, utilizing a college basketball rivalry game. They found that after the game, fans of the winning team had significantly elevated testosterone levels. Fans of the losing team had significantly decreased testosterone levels. Although the experience was still vicarious, the fans were at least surrounded by the raucous atmosphere inside the arena, so it is possible that proximity to the event played a role in the elevated or decreased testosterone. Apparently proximity is not important. In the second study, Bernhardt et al. measured testosterone levels in fans who simply watched a sporting event (televised World Cup soccer match) in which the fans has a vested interest, finding the same results as the previous experiment: fans of the winning team had significantly elevated levels of testosterone and fans of the losing team had significantly lower levels of testosterone. These findings suggest that if a fan is vested, there are consequences that go beyond changes in psychological phenomena (i.e., mood, self-esteem, etc.).

Testosterone is not the only physiological marker being tested. Zalla, Koechlin, Pietrini, Basso, Aquino, Sirigu, and Grafman (2000), utilizing MRI technology, explored changes in the amygdala in response to winning and losing. The amygdala is a small structure in the brain that is associated with processing of memory, decision-making, and emotional reactions, among others. In a simulated competitive event, Zalla et al. demonstrated that the amygdala responded differently to winning and losing, which could ultimately influence emotional response to competition. The researchers also found that not only did the amygdala respond differently to winning and losing, but so did other regions of the brain such as the prefrontal cortex, the hippocampus, and the ventral striatum. Although these brain regions and structures “light up” differently depending on winning or losing, the researchers readily admit that they are not sure exactly what this means and how it might play out in the life of the competitor. For now, we know that the brain itself responds differently to winning and losing; future scientists will determine what the implications are.

Theology of losing

Navone (1990) said, “Life stories, the search for our true story, involve a struggle from their very beginning ... There are human failures and mediocrities” (p. 223-24). With this basic understanding - life is difficult - we can begin to appreciate the theology of losing. From the outset on this topic, we must be careful to not conflate failure and losing. These terms are not synonymous and entirely interchangeable - not all failure may result in a loss, although ultimately, losing is likely the result of failure – but the terms are certainly related. In discussing theology, more writers have considered failure than losing.

It is striking that Paul would employ athletic metaphors, appealing to their love of games such as the Olympics, to describe the Christian walk in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Utilizing metaphors that would have been readily apparent to his audience (Gill, 2012), Paul invokes a powerful image of a runner and a fighter, encouraging us to never give up. Note that Paul does not indicate that losing or failure will never happen. Perhaps it is a given, from Paul’s perspective, that failure will occasionally occur. Failure is tolerable if one keeps his/her eye on the prize and runs as if to win. Reflecting on Christian mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters, Greve (2014) stated,

“Fighters realize that believers are not guaranteed victory and do not seem to see losing as a sign of moral failure. Christian fighter Vitor Belfort tells fans, "Don't worry, you're going to lose, you're going to win, you're going to lose, you're going to win." The important thing is "to purify the goal," that is, to fight for good reasons and with a godly spirit” (p. 180).

Perhaps the Apostle Paul understands that we are fallen individuals living in a broken and fallen world. Accordingly, his goal, and the goal of other inspired writers, is not to remove us from the brokenness, but to prepare and equip us for the journey, filling the Christian with hope and promise despite the mounting losses we experience.

McCallum and DeLashmutt (n.d.) blogged about the theology of failure, stressing that modern Christians have been made soft through our myriad of successes and often devastated at failure because losing is an affront to our ego-driven existence. In their various ministry pursuits, McCallum and DeLashmutt were convinced that success has only been possible because of experienced failure. While losing never feels good, there are several lessons to be learned. First, losing, not winning, is what teaches us more accurately what works and what does not work. Failure results in a necessary examination of our pride. An examination of pride has the opportunity to teach us about our need for dependence on something greater than ourselves, humbling us before our Creator in ways that winning cannot. Self-sufficiency is antithetical to the Christian race. Paul offered this reflection,

“But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for

Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-11 NIV).

In addition, failure can sharpen our resolve for discernment. Honest introspection can lead to a humbled spirit which is ripe for communion with the Lord. A natural extension to humility is greater reliance on the grace of God to prepare us for future endeavors. Finally, failure provides the Christian with the opportunity to develop deeper convictions for the future. Through a humbled, grace-filled spirit, failure can allow us to be blessed in ways we might not otherwise experience. Reflecting on Wesley's theology of losing, Niles (2008) concluded,

"We need not be victims of our failure experiences (or our attempts to deal with our failure experiences). We need not be condemned to suffering endless cycles of repetition and hopelessness in the Christian life. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8:37) as we receive community mediation of our failure as a means of grace in our spiritual lives" (p. 132)

Conclusion

So what then is to become of the loser? What is the proper balance between winning and losing? Kanter (2004) stated that losing serves as an alarm, alerting one to the need for recalibration. Duina (2011) framed it as a time for reexamination. Repeated and consistent failure could be a sign that the competitor is incompetent, lacking the necessary talent, training, motivation, and/or effort. Losing, then, can become an opportunity to discover what went wrong, what could be done differently next time, what changes need to be made, etc. Having been "left behind", the loser can be motivated to reassess and make plans to decrease the likelihood of losing again in the future. Losing allows for soul-searching and exploration of self in a way that winning does not. Winners have been proven "right", thus connoting no need for change; losers have been proven "wrong" which provides for self-examination of one's limitations, faults, and weaknesses. Winning does not reverberate to one's core the way losing can.

Winners are constantly pursued by the loser. Losers are given repeated opportunities to challenge for the top spot again. As Dunia stated, "Whenever something serious is at stake, there lurks 'beneath' the current winner a number of incredibly hungry, single-minded people ready to devote all they have to take his place" (p. 68). An example of challenging the winners can be seen in an examination of "space". Winners, Dunia argued, have more space – big offices, big cars, big houses, suites at the game and opera, first class seats that offer more room to relax, large banners hanging from the rafters that take up space, and so on, and losers are much more cramped – smaller offices, smaller cars, smaller houses, coach seats on the plane and bleacher seats at the game. Losers must fight for more space, often at the expense of taking that space from the

winners; the motivation for acquiring space is certainly a large aspect of the American Dream.

Perhaps winning becomes more sweet, and the victor more noteworthy, after overcoming an avalanche of defeat. President Abraham Lincoln comes to mind. On the way to becoming the 16th President of the United States, Lincoln lost his first bid at political office in the Illinois House of Representatives, his bid for Speaker of the Illinois House, and both bids for the U.S. Senate, and yet went on to become one of the most important and influential American leaders in history (Miers, 1988). In the sports world, Michael Jordan famously said,

“I’ve missed over 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed”
(Goldman & Papson, 1998, p. 49).

To achieve winning through losing, observers and participants can differentiate between the outcome and the process of an event. In a real sense, we can separate the effort from the final product. For example, if the outcome of an event leads to a loss, an individual can readily point to the hard work, dedication, and determination it took to get there in the first place, often ignoring the outcome altogether. Reflection alone can bring a sense of satisfaction. This is a very different perspective than that of the winner, whose success can always be marked by the outcome, despite a process that might be less than stellar. The winner, while infatuated with the outcome itself, might be less likely to critically examine a faulty process (Riess & Taylor, 1984). Dunia theorized four process-oriented traits that a loser can and should cultivate and embrace: goal clarity, uncompromising effort, relentless optimism, and a willingness to learn.

Perhaps, then, success can result because of failure, winning because of losing. As Dunia (2011) stated, “... for what counts is one’s unabated effort against continuing disappointing results” (p. 105). Perhaps this is the greatest theological message about losing. Against all odds, with a careful and constant introspection, the Christian marches ever onward. The writer of Hebrews makes this statement explicit when he said,

“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”
(Hebrews 12:1-3 NIV).

A proper perspective of competition and winning is essential. To this end, Cumming, Smoll, Smith, and Grossbard (2007) stated, “The primary goal... should be to develop desirable psychological and social characteristics as well as physical skills and fitness... Winning should be viewed as a consequence of the athlete’s physical and psychological

development and not the primary focus of athletic involvement” (p. 323). Quitting, as Bronson & Merryman (2013) noted, is more shameful than losing. Competition, whether against another person, a team, or self, can be a training ground for improvement – to enjoy the fruits of winning, but also to embrace the lessons of losing. James offers this encouragement at the outset of his letter to Jewish believers. May it also serve us when the inevitable loss invades our lives:

“... when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing” (James 1:2-4 NIV).

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