

Winning



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We gather here to celebrate a special day. You are here today because you have won. Over the past many years, you have struggled, you have worked hard, you have agonized, you have overcome doubt, you have competed, and, finally, you have won. But what is this “winning”? What does it take? What gets in the way? How does it evolve over a lifetime? Today, as you gather with your loved ones to celebrate your latest triumph and accomplishment, let’s pause to examine the idea of winning. In doing so, please allow me to share how the idea has evolved in my mind from the time I was a child to where I am today.

Of the many things my parents taught me when I was a child, three in particular formed the foundation upon which I built my adult life.

The first tenet of the Bagchi household was: excel before you win. The idea of being your best, sharpening your saw, and being steadfast and deserving, was given higher priority in our household than simply going out there to win.

The second tenet of the Bagchi household was: hold yourself to high standards, and compete with worthy competition. Even today, I remember the Sanskrit saying that my parents and elder brothers often quoted: ***“Nirasta padape deshe erandopi drumayate,”*** Where none better exists, even the castor plant tries to pass off as a big tree. That is to

say, sometimes you might just be a small castor plant; in the absence of worthy competition, glory is false.

The third tenet of the family was: win with fairness and integrity. This was a lesson from my mother. She would frequently quote lines from an Odia poem depicting a poignant scene from the Mahabharata. Duryodhana, the eldest of Queen Gandhari’s hundred sons, had come to seek her blessings before waging the Great War against the Pandavas. At that point of love and valor and decisiveness, instead of saying, “May you return victorious,” Gandhari said, “May virtue remain undiminished and may it be the victory of the truth.” Her son was taken aback but, with those words, Gandhari underscored the importance of winning for a higher purpose, winning with integrity.

It is one thing to win fair and square at school, college and small places but how about winning fair and square at the workplace, in the big city and in the big, wide world out there? What about being among people who win by rigging the system and, sometimes, glorifying that act? Does winning become an idealization of innocent childhood? Does it have any relevance at the starting point of a profession where a large, invisible billboard says, “Welcome to the Real World”?

I was lucky to spend a decade of my young professional days at Wipro. What made Wipro distinct from other companies was Chairman

Azim Premji's stand on the subject of Integrity. The end does not justify the means. It was the bedrock for a corporation that wouldn't bribe in order to acquire a license, or to get a power connection for a new plant, or to get business from customers. Wipro would rather walk out of business than do anything underhand.

This was a tough call in the 70's and the 80's because, at that time, Wipro's business entirely depended on the Indian marketplace. When you work with global customers from the developed world, it is not difficult to play it by the book. But in India back then, it was another thing. Sometimes, business in India required underhand dealing and Wipro required that you not do it. But to Premji, the requirement to be honest did not absolve his employees from competing hard and winning. He wanted all his businesses to be No. 1 or No. 2. Being honest did not mean being ineffective.

During my days at Wipro, I learned that it is possible to win with integrity. It is difficult, but it is also wonderfully surprising how many people there are out in the world who are like you, and how they form an ever expanding circle of the glorious good. They form a community; they buy and sell to each other; they support each other. So, even in the real world, there are two real worlds. You can choose the one you like. If ever someone tells you, "Welcome to reality," look him in the eye and ask, "Which one?"

Your professional life is not short. As a professional you have a really long play. At each stage of it, you must compete and win. The years of being a young professional are also defined by life as a spouse and as a parent. Sometimes you will find yourself competing for material things, and sometimes for love. It is one thing to compete and win once or even occasionally; it is quite another thing to be able to repeat the feat, to sustain it. That is why we say, "Life is not a sprint; it is a marathon." People who run long-distance think, train and run differently. People who win sustainably think, train and win differently. This is counter-intuitive in a culture that glorifies the two-minute claim to fame and instant stardom. Not a day goes by without someone making a viral debut, thanks to the Internet; then, the very next day, it is someone else's turn to claim the two minutes of fame. In such a world, consistence is critical.

Let us now turn to a very important question: what do we seek to win? As a child, we are told to win prizes, and we win them. As we grow in our professions, we seek to go a step beyond. We seek to win awards. Having won those awards, the next step is to win recognition. Prizes and awards do not always add up to recognition. You can win a prize or an award only so many times, but recognition is more sustaining. Recognition is what precedes your arrival and it comes from your own peers and competitors. To win the respect

of peers and competitors is tough and it is clearly the higher win.

But beyond winning recognition for your work and accomplishments, is winning for a cause. Unlike all the other kinds of winning, winning for a cause takes a long time and invariably asks the winner to survive seemingly insurmountable odds. In the quest to win for a cause, life often asks for the ability to deal with protracted adversity. This is the kind of win that men like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela experienced. This is the kind of win women like Malala Yousafzai and Aung San Suu Kyi symbolize. When you look at the lives of people like them, you realize that adversity isn't always an external force opposing your cause; sometimes, it is your own circumstance.

Consider Dr. Venkatappa Govindaswamy, founder of Aravind, the world's largest eye hospital. Born in a poor hamlet, young Dr. Govindaswamy was moved by the untimely death of a young woman in his village. She died at childbirth. Moved by human misery, he resolved to become a doctor. One day, he did become a doctor: a gynecologist. Thereafter, he joined the Army as a doctor but contracted a rare form of rheumatoid arthritis that twisted his fingers and toes badly out of shape. The Army discharged him.

Undeterred by this cruel turn of fate, Dr. Govindaswamy retrained himself to become

an ophthalmic surgeon, an eye-doctor. For this, he retrained his crooked fingers to hold surgical instruments, sometimes modifying the instruments. He practiced ophthalmic surgery until his retirement. Upon retirement, he started an 11-bed eye hospital with his meagre savings because he was moved by what he called needless blindness. In so doing, he created a great institution that has survived him. To date, Aravind has treated 32 million patients and operated upon 4 million; 70% of them did not have to pay anything. Dr. Govindaswamy was moved by the fact that India is the blindness capital of the world. But more importantly, much of the blindness is the result of ignorance or lack of access to medical facilities among the rural poor. This was what Dr. Govindaswamy called "needless blindness" and he gave his life to the cause to prevent it. Before he set out to win for the cause, he had to overcome his own adversity, without which Aravind would not have been born.

In winning, we must be prepared to deal with our adversities. But sometimes, we witness the adversity of an adversary. In a moment like that, the meaning of winning changes entirely.

Let me tell you the story of a man named John Michael Landy. Landy is a former Olympic athlete from Australia. While competing in a 1500-meter race at the Australian National Games, which was the preliminary to compete in the Olympics, Landy realized that his fellow runner Ron

Clarke had fallen down. Landy turned back, ran to him, lifted him up on his feet and ran again! Then he doubled his pace and ended up winning the race. But he also won hearts. He won the admiration of an entire mankind for generations to come because he underscored the need for empathy even as he was competing to win.

Similar is the remarkable story of Canadian sailor Lawrence Lemieux who was competing at the Seoul Olympics. He was sailing at the second position when he saw the boat of two Singaporean sailors capsize in choppy waters. Lemieux veered off course to bring them out of the treacherous waters to his own boat and, in the process, he lost his lead in the race. Afterwards, he was honored with a second position and a special award by the President of the International Olympic Association, who said, "By your sportsmanship, self-sacrifice and courage you embody all that is right with the Olympic ideal."

People like Landy and Lemieux show us that we must compete and win without losing empathy for fellow humans. We must compete and win with a sense of abundance, not scarcity. We must not lose sight of the wellbeing of a competitor, whose respect and sometimes gratitude is bigger than the medal we covet.

Winning requires ambition, practice, steadfastness, a competitive spirit and

flawless execution. Everyone will tell you that for all these, you need to know your true strengths. I would like to add this: you need to know your weaknesses as well. You need to know three things about them, only one of which gets highlighted by everyone. That is something fairly obvious: work on your weaknesses even as you work on your strengths.

While this is important, it is equally important to recognize those of your limitations that you cannot overcome. This is the second thing to know about weaknesses. It takes great self-awareness to know what you cannot do. Instead of getting frustrated with one's limitation, instead of bemoaning circumstances, one needs to know how to circumnavigate it. A young sapling sprouted under a rock does not try to break the rock; it does not curse its fate. It bends and finds its way to seek sunlight and grows by the side of the rock until one day it becomes a big tree and, one day, the rock remains at its feet. The tree circumnavigates its way because it recognizes its limitation. When the rules of the game are against you, it isn't a bad idea to change the game itself.

The third thing to know about weaknesses is that there are limitations that we must acknowledge and accept with grace. If I am a rabbit, it is not a good idea to fly, and, if I am an eagle, I should not bemoan my inability to run. All of us are designed to deliver a purpose on this earth in this one lifetime. We need to

deal with many adversities along the way, and we should not be weighed down by our exasperation with those limitations that we cannot overcome. Our frustration with them comes from a sense of false comparison in us; it leaves us with ingratitude and it takes us away from the joy of celebration.

Earlier, I spoke about three kinds of winning: winning for myself (as in prizes and awards), winning with others (as in recognition and respect), and winning for others (as in advancing a cause). Now let me tell you about the ultimate winning: it is winning against the idea of winning.

All winning, as we noted earlier, requires excellence, ambition, steadfastness, strategy, fair play and flawless execution. The question is why these must surface only when there is

reward and recognition. Why can't these define every moment of our lives? When we embrace the realization that they can in fact define every moment of our lives, we get to the ultimate state. In this state, winning ceases to be external; the smallest win becomes as significant as the biggest win, regardless of what we are set out to do; and we win all the way. In the process, we win by celebrating the spirit of winning, of which a key requirement is sharing our winning with others, sparking the spirit of winning in others, and finally, giving the formula away.

In this ultimate state, our work is the reward, the competition is within us, excellence is the only path and the joy is in giving it all away.

Thank you for having me in your midst on a day like this, and may you go kiss the world!

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