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SUNRISE IN THE BRONX

Chess and Life Lessons
from the South Bronx
to the White House

NEW  IN CHESS

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A Word on the Title

I've always loved early mornings. In high school, my paper route got me up every morning at 4:30. The world was quiet and asleep as I rode my bicycle through the house-lined streets down to the Standard Oil gas station to fold my papers. No one was around except for my fellow paperboys. An occasional State Trooper drove by. A truck delivered bread to a local grocery store, another brought magazines to the drug store. That was about it. I loved the slow dawning, the fresh dew glistening in the sun, with only the soft sound of a paper hitting a porch to break the solitude of the moment.

Decades later, with many lives in between, I found myself teaching chess at a large elementary school in the Bronx. As I drove to school in the early morning, the sun would just begin to show as it rose over the buildings and bridges in the Bronx. I was again enjoying the relative peace of early morning, but this time from the comfort of my Buick station wagon. I've always felt that sunrise was a symbol of hope, the promise of a fresh start.

And that is what I was offering the children at the school where I was now a teacher. I wanted to give them, each and every day, a fresh start. It began with the hopeful symbol of the sunrise.

CHAPTER 1

I Said Yes

Where to begin... after an eclectic background in various careers, occupations, and activities in music, theatre, writing, construction, real estate sales, and building management, along with a host of other endeavors, in my mid-forties a long-time friend, Bruce Pandolfini, chess master, teacher, writer, and analyst, asked me to substitute for him teaching a chess class.

I thought he must be crazy. I loved to play chess, but I had never taken it seriously. I had been playing chess casually since my father taught me and my brother when we were five and six years old, respectively. I had studied *Lasker's Manual of Chess* in high school, and afterwards in the Navy. Years later, a friend over whom I had had a winning edge in hundreds of casual games secretly studied Aaron Nimzovitch's book, *My System*. After that, he began beating me regularly. When he confessed to reading Nimzovitch, I got the book, too. After studying it once, I caught up again, and after going through it a second time, I regained my lost lead. Then he started beating me again. I said, "Okay, Michael, what did you study this time?" He told me it was a series of books by the Czech grandmaster Ludek Pachman. So I studied Pachman, and caught up again. I had also played in a few random tournaments over the years, but that was about it. I wasn't a total ignoramus, but I was certainly no master.

Bruce was obviously desperate, and finally convinced me

to step into the classroom, assuring me that I knew more than the third graders I was to teach. He gave me a quick lesson idea and off I went.

As I was looking into those eager little faces, challenging them to think about patterns and move sequences, I was grateful for the ten years I had spent on stage as a professional actor in New York. Teaching is performing and feeling confident in front of an audience. After hundreds of performances in front of large audiences, a small class of children was easy. I didn't realize until I actually became a real teacher that my ease at the time was due to the regular classroom teacher's presence in the room, keeping control of the children.

I can't claim that I was much of a teacher then, but it was an exhilarating experience. Apparently, Bruce got good feedback, because he asked me to teach a second class. I was all in.

My real job had been managing buildings in the East Village. In the late 80s and early 90s, the East Village was just on its way to gentrification, but that was several years away. Although it was still a rough area, that didn't bother me. I've never been one to fear the streets.

What bothered me was my new boss. My previous bosses were both doctors who had seen the promise of a real estate boom in the East Village and got in early. They were ethical, trustworthy, and decent people, not the sort commonly seen in the often cut-throat, dog-eat-dog world of New York real estate.

My assignment was to keep their buildings running and in good repair. Having worked for a contractor renovating apartments and making furniture, I knew a bit about how buildings work and how to fix things. I had also taken classes at The New School in building construction. If something went wrong in someone's apartment, I wanted to get it repaired quickly, and ensure that the work was up to standard. After all, I was also a tenant myself. Both doctors were good people and, in addition to obviously want-

ing to make money in real estate, had a genuine concern for taking care of the tenants.

After I had been with them for a couple of years however, they decided to outsource the management. I would still take care of their buildings, but I would report to a different boss. My new boss was at the opposite end of the ethical continuum from the doctors. My third day on the job, he told me his guiding philosophy: tenants were parasites, always trying to get over on us. Whatever tricks they were playing, it was our job to beat them. If your default view is that all communication with a particular set of people is a power struggle, that's going to make for lousy communication and terrible relationships. In his adversarial view, tenants were fair game for abuse. I felt sick to my stomach.

That afternoon — it was a Friday — a tenant called to say her toilet was broken. I went over to look at it. It appeared to be a broken flange. Fixing that was way above my skill set, and also above the abilities of our handyman. Going back to the office, I got on the phone to call the plumber. It was just before five. As I was talking to the plumber, my new boss overheard me. He stormed over, put his finger on the phone to disconnect the call (it was all land line phones in those days), and growled: “What the hell are you doing? It's five o'clock on a Friday night! That's triple overtime for a plumber! Call him back Monday morning.”

He was serious. He was fine that this woman with two small children would be without a toilet over the weekend. I was appalled. When he wouldn't budge on the issue, I realized I could not work for this man. He was missing what I consider to be the most important part of our shared humanity: he seemed to be lacking the empathy gene. I quit on the spot. They say you don't quit a job, you quit a boss. My brother has a saying, “If you're a good chief, I'm a great Indian. If not, I'm finding another tribe.” Well, that's me, too.

Somehow, timing has always gone my way. The next day, Bruce asked me to quit my job in building management

and come work as a chess teacher for the American Chess Foundation. I didn't have to think. After all, I didn't have a job to quit. I said yes.

Success and Failure

Success does not necessarily mean being the best, or the first. To me, success is just doing better than you did before. It's accomplishing a goal, improving from where you were. When our team came in 13th, that was a success. When we came in 5th, that was a success. You aim for the top of the mountain. Very few actually get there, but the higher up you go, the better the view.

The subject I taught was chess. However, in my mind, I was teaching the *process* for achieving success in any field. The model I used was my early training as a musician. The first thing Mr. Swor, our band director, did was teach us rhythm. We learned to count out the various beats in a measure of 4/4 time. There are four beats to a measure and a quarter note gets one beat. We would clap once for each beat, so we did four rhythmic claps of equal time for each measure. This could be expanded to two half-notes, so we would clap on one, hold on two, clap again on three and hold again on four. It could also be a whole note: clap on one, and hold for two, three, and four. It could also be subdivided further into eighth notes, or sixteenth notes. A dot after a note increases its duration by half, so a dotted quarter note is a beat and a half, or a dotted eighth note is three quarters of a beat. These combinations give rise to all sorts of complicated patterns, which simply must be mastered. Our first three weeks of band practice was just clapping out rhythms, beginning with very simple ones, and grow-

ing to exceptionally complex patterns. By the time we got our instruments, there was no rhythm we could not immediately understand and implement. This had nothing to do with pitch or phrasing, it was just getting us to understand the duration of time in music.

When we did get our instruments, the next step was to learn how to make the different pitch sounds on our respective instruments, which in my case was the baritone, or euphonium. (The baritone is really a tenor tuba. In band transcriptions of orchestral pieces, the baritone often plays the cello parts.) Combining pitch with rhythm, we could play simple melodies. Combining different instruments to play different notes of the chords, base lines, and counter-melodies, we could play more complex and interesting music than a simple one note at a time melody.

Then we had to become more technically proficient, with scales, intervals, and playing in different key signatures. At the same time, we were also learning to improve our tone, so the sounds coming out of our instruments would be pleasing to hear. When we added how to form a musical phrase, how to increase or decrease the volume of a passage (crescendos and decrescendos), how to listen to the other musicians so our part would blend in appropriately, how to vary the tempo to help define mood and feeling, we were finally playing music. There was, of course, a very long way to go from there, but we had a solid base to build on, and we were well on our way to actually becoming musicians.

The process that I adopted for teaching the children to be successful through chess was just a transference of concepts from the well-established system I had learned as a musician. First you have to imitate the patterns that are essential. After imitation comes incorporation and integration, where the patterns become so fixed and immediate that they are an instantaneous reaction to a stimulus. Only after the patterns have become so natural that they seem to be unthinking, can there be innovation. Or, as Bruce Lee

famously said, without technique there can be no art. Put another way, Steve Jobs, of Apple fame, said creativity is seeing connections. Obviously, in order to see connections, one must have a lot of things to connect. Imitation, incorporation and integration, then on to innovation. Patterns, again.

Regardless of the field, the process is essentially the same. First, you have to learn the rules and procedures that define the field. Then you have to learn the fundamental patterns and the principles that guide decision-making. Then you must add the subtleties of how different parts work together. In chess, that means keeping an eye on the whole board to see where every piece is and what each can do, both individually and how and when they can work together. On top of all that, you have to keep a sharp eye out for the minefields your opponent is laying. But success in chess is not achieved only when sitting at the board in the tournament hall. A huge amount of study beforehand is essential. There are also many factors off the board, such as rest, nutrition, hydration, and an emotionally clear mind, that will have an effect on the performance over the board. Achieving success in any worthwhile undertaking is a long-term, complex affair.

My job, both in the classroom and in training the team, was to find ways for the children to learn to be successful. If a child doesn't know how a rook moves, and then learns how a rook moves, that is a success. After a few small successes, a critical mass is reached, and the children believe that they can learn whatever is coming next. The key is to keep raising the level, but always staying within the ability of the students to reach the goal. If the task is too easy, they won't feel that they have done anything. If it's too difficult, they will feel frustrated and will often give up. When the teacher structures lessons so the students feel challenged, but can reach whatever the goal is, they feel a sense of accomplishment, and will be spurred on to reach higher, firmly believing they can do it.

Through this method of optimum challenges, the children also learn to be optimistic, to believe they can accomplish the task ahead. Optimistic people have a positive view of the future, while a defeatist sees little good coming down the road. If not much good is going to happen, why bother trying? Persistence, optimism, and self-motivation are closely linked, and are clearly associated with success.

Not surprisingly, optimistic students do better in everything, compared to their defeatist peers. One of the most important observations from the classroom is that optimism can be learned.

Given the right opportunities, the defeatist, or negative student can be turned around. Such children need to see that they can do something well.

Because chess can be broken down into extremely small parts—identifying a straight line, a right angle, squares, rows of squares, naming squares, moving a rook correctly, attacking a piece, capturing the piece, attacking two pieces at once, pinning a piece, trapping a king—a teacher can structure exercises for even very low functioning children to meet with success, while offering enough of a challenge to make the activities worthwhile.

Once a student feels the first flush of success, and receives approval from the teacher, the next step up the ladder is seen to be reachable. After several such steps, the child can look back and see a growing chain of accomplishments. With each success, enthusiasm grows. The child seeks more mental stimulation, like a flower reaching for sunlight. Without the child even realizing it, persistence becomes a habit, and the rewards of persistence seem to fall into the child's lap. That the child has actually been putting in a lot of effort is only noticeable to an outsider. The child has been playing and having fun.

With proper timing, the teacher can present the child with a truly difficult problem. When the child meets a significant challenge successfully, a major hurdle has been crossed. Confidence increases, and the likelihood of con-

tinued success is high. The key is for the teacher to carefully keep the exercises at the challenging level, where the child can succeed with appropriate effort. The pattern is simple:

Success → Confidence → Optimism → Success

Thinking is fun. That aha! moment, the moment of discovery, is an exhilarating experience. Just as physical exercise of the body can be a joyous experience, so can exercising the mind. When the children feel rewarded for using their minds well, they crave more such stimulation. One of the amusing things for me to see is how, at the end of a tournament where the children have been battling over the board for hours, they would often get together immediately to play more chess. They couldn't get enough of the joy of using their minds.

Success and failure are both learned. I have met countless adults who feel they cannot do something—draw, play a musical instrument, dance, think mathematically... the list is endless—because someone said something that was negative, discouraging, disparaging, or hurtful. As teachers, we must adhere to the words of the 17th century physician, Thomas Sydenham: “First do no harm.”

I often thought back to Sylvia's statement to the new teachers: “Our goal is to prepare students to be thinking, caring, productive, and successful adults.” Given the many factors going in the opposite direction, this was an uphill struggle every day at our school.

The students at 70—and at most schools in the deprived areas of our cities—need to be given reasons to believe in success. They need reasons to feel optimistic. They need reasons to develop discipline, which is vital to any meaningful accomplishment. Optimism, feeling they can be successful, is based on an accomplishment in some worthwhile endeavor. In an overcrowded classroom, with many social impediments in their lives, accomplishments—and

the supporting praise that follows — can easily be in short supply. They will have little reason to feel confident about their future. This lack of confidence is at the core of the problems with many of our youth in these areas. Lacking confidence in their academic standing, they may seek fulfillment in other often deleterious ways. Feelings of inadequacy in one area of their lives can lead to overcompensating in others. The classic case of students acting out in the classroom, making the teacher's life miserable, has its roots in this downward spiral. As teachers, we need to understand that this acting out is a not very veiled cry for help, and to respond with care, understanding, and compassion. This was the lesson my special ed student, Jake, taught me very early in my career.

Another form of overcompensating can be found in bullying or disparaging others. The literature on the subject tells us there are many underlying dynamics to bullying, but regardless of cause, it is one of the ways some children try to find success, and it must be addressed at every turn. I saw this often in the classroom, and occasionally on our team. Children sometimes seek to elevate themselves by humiliating or demolishing those around them. Over and over I had to stress that the goal is personal excellence. The real competition is with who you were yesterday, not with others around you. Personal excellence is achieved through steady practice and study, not by belittling or lording it over others. Fortunately, there were some on our team who seem to have been born understanding that notion. They were great role models for the others.

Sometimes children first starting out get discouraged when they lose several games in a row. I liked to tell them the story of a young lion that had just been pushed out of the pride and was now on his own. He came across a herd of zebras and thought, aha, here's dinner! In his excitement, he charged at the herd, but he started from too soon and from too far away. The zebras saw the lion and ran, leaving him in a cloud of dust.