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Competition and Disharmony

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Joan and Russ Donaldson are information consultants whose work on contemporary information systems has led them to question the basis of our technological optimism.

Of six runners lined up at the starting point of a race, five will soon be seen as losers.

When two high school soccer teams run onto the playing field it's only a matter of time until half the players are on a losing team.

Two soft drink manufacturers each spend hundreds of millions of dollars on international advertising. When one gains a larger share of the market, the other loses.

From kindergarten playgrounds to the international trade arena, groups as well as individuals seem to be persuaded that competition is a natural and necessary part of their lifestyle. And so they set themselves up for failure.

The six runners think they're striving for excellence. What's really happening is that the losers (rather than being applauded for having done their personal best) will be seen as having failed. The six runners who began the race as a group of equals will finish as one winner and five losers. Not very good odds in terms of recognition or self-worth.

The soccer teams, each hyped with the notion that We're Number One!, surge onto the field in a wave of optimism. At the end of the contest half of them know that they're the failures they had derided just a short time before.

There isn't any room within the framework of competition as we know it for all the participants to be successful. And a community consisting largely of apparent failures is a community at risk from within.

Looking for alternatives to competitive attitudes is a useful and frequently illuminating challenge. Examination of fundamental assumptions can bring surprising results. In the racer's striving for excellence, for example, the excellence seems to be limited to the speed with which that person can get from the beginning to the end of the course. We can wonder whether or not that measurement is important enough to risk the potential losses, or whether there might be more to the act of running than speed, more to being a runner than denigrating your peers. Does competitive racing, in fact, belittle the sport of running?

Ethologists tell us that, in this case, we have choices. There are so called primitive people who have traditions of communal running/racing, the young and the old helping and encouraging each other along the way. They begin as equals and at the end of the course they're still equal, but each is better for having raced. Getting to the end of the course before the others isn't seen as a particular virtue.

The cola manufacturers tell us that healthy competition keeps the market active and stimulates the economy. Certainly it appears to stimulate profit for some investors, and losses for others. To avoid industry losses, therefore, the market must expand. That can happen if an artificial need is created, which benefits investors enormously and is frequently a disservice to the community as a whole.

Although various examples of competition have different pros and cons to discuss, the theme underlying them all is that competition, as it's practiced in our culture, sets us to working against each other, rather than working together toward some common goal.

Each of us can find any number of examples to illustrate that competition brings out our most negative attitudes. Spectators at hockey games cheer when an opposition player is wounded in a free-for-all, cribbage players break up good hands to make sure their opponents don't get a good card in the crib, governments amass more nuclear weapons than their neighbours, all in the name of competition.

Which is peculiar, considering the origins of the word. The prefix com means together. Petere is Latin for to seek. If to compete really ought to mean to seek together, maybe it's our attitude to competition that's destroying us.

Where did we go wrong?

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