A JOURNEY IN THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

THE ART OF LEARNING

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Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

JOSH WAITZKIN

THE ART OF LEARNING

A Journey in the Pursuit of Excellence

Josh Waitzkin

FREE PRESS
New York London Toronto Sydney

FREE PRESS
A Division of Simon & Schuster Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Part pages photo credits:
Part 1: Josh at the Manhattan Chess Club, age seven.
Photo by Bonnie Waitzkin.
Part 2: Training for the 2002 Worlds. Photo by Andrew Kist.
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DESIGNED BY ERICH HOBBING

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Control Number: 2006052539

ISBN 13: 978-0-7432-7745-7
ISBN 10: 0-7432-7745-7

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INTRODUCTION

> One has to investigate the principle in one thing or one event exhaustively . . . Things and the self are governed by the same principle. If you understand one, you understand the other, for the truth within and the truth without are identical.
>
> —Er Cheng Yishu, 11th century*

Finals: Tai Chi Chuan Push Hands World Championships
Hsinchuang Stadium, Taipei, Taiwan
December 5, 2004

Forty seconds before round two, and I'm lying on my back trying to breathe. Pain all through me. Deep breath. Let it go. I won't be able to lift my shoulder tomorrow, it won't heal for over a year, but now it pulses, alive, and I feel the air vibrating around me, the stadium shaking with chants, in Mandarin, not for me. My teammates are kneeling above me, looking worried. They rub my arms, my shoulders, my legs. The bell rings. I hear my dad's voice in the stands,

*William Theodore de Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition,* Vol. 1, 2nd ed., Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 696.

'C'mon Josh!' Gotta get up. I watch my opponent run to the center of the ring. He screams, pounds his chest. The fans explode. They call him Buffalo. Bigger than me, stronger, quick as a cat. But I can take him—if I make it to the middle of the ring without falling over. I have to dig deep, bring it up from somewhere right now. Our wrists touch, the bell rings, and he hits me like a Mack truck.

Who could have guessed it would come to this? Just a few years earlier I had been competing around the world in elite chess tournaments. Since I was eight years old, I had consistently been the highest rated player for my age in the United States, and my life was dominated by competitions and training regimens designed to bring me into peak form for the next national or world championship. I had spent the years between ages fifteen and eighteen in the maelstrom of American media following the release of the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer,* which was based on my dad's book about my early chess life. I was known as America's great young chess player and was told that it was my destiny to follow in the footsteps of immortals like Bobby Fischer and Garry Kasparov, to be world champion.

But there were problems. After the movie came out I couldn't go to a tournament without being surrounded by fans asking for autographs. Instead of focusing on chess positions, I was pulled into the image of myself as a celebrity. Since childhood I had treasured the sublime study of chess, the swim through ever-deepening layers of complexity. I could spend hours at a chessboard and stand up from the experience on fire with insight about chess, basketball, the ocean, psychology, love, art. The game was exhilarating and also spiritually calming. It centered me. Chess was my friend. Then, suddenly, the game became alien and disquieting.

I recall one tournament in Las Vegas: I was a young International Master in a field of a thousand competitors including twenty-six strong Grandmasters from around the world. As an up-and-coming player, I had huge respect for the great sages around me. I had studied their masterpieces for hundreds of hours and was awed by the artistry of these men. Before first-round play began I was seated at my board, deep in thought about my opening preparation, when the public address system announced that the subject of *Searching for Bobby Fischer* was at the event. A tournament director placed a poster of the movie next to my table, and immediately a sea of fans surged around the ropes separating the top boards from the audience. As the games progressed, when I rose to clear my mind young girls gave me their phone numbers and asked me to autograph their stomachs or legs.

This might sound like a dream for a seventeen-year-old boy, and I won't deny enjoying the attention, but professionally it was a nightmare. My game began to unravel. I caught myself thinking about how I looked thinking instead of losing myself in thought. The Grandmasters, my elders, were ignored and scowled at me. Some of them treated me like a pariah. I had won eight national championships and had more fans, public support and recognition than I could dream of, but none of this was helping my search for excellence, let alone for happiness.

At a young age I came to know that there is something profoundly hollow about the nature of fame. I had spent my life devoted to artistic growth and was used to the sweaty-palmed sense of contentment one gets after many hours of intense reflection. This peaceful feeling had nothing to do with external adulation, and I yearned for a return to that innocent, fertile time. I missed just being a student of the

game, but there was no escaping the spotlight. I found myself dreading chess, miserable before leaving for tournaments. I played without inspiration and was invited to appear on television shows. I smiled.

Then when I was eighteen years old I stumbled upon a little book called the *Tao Te Ching,* and my life took a turn. I was moved by the book's natural wisdom and I started delving into other Buddhist and Taoist philosophical texts. I recognized that being at the pinnacle in other people's eyes had nothing to do with quality of life, and I was drawn to the potential for inner tranquility.

On October 5, 1998, I walked into William C. C. Chen's Tai Chi Chuan studio in downtown Manhattan and found myself surrounded by peacefully concentrating men and women floating through a choreographed set of movements. I was used to driven chess players cultivating tunnel vision in order to win the big game, but now the focus was on bodily awareness, as if there were some inner bliss that resulted from mindfully moving slowly in strange ways.

I began taking classes and after a few weeks I found myself practicing the meditative movements for hours at home. Given the complicated nature of my chess life, it was beautifully liberating to be learning in an environment in which I was simply one of the beginners—and something felt right about this art. I was amazed by the way my body pulsed with life when flowing through the ancient steps, as if I were tapping into a primal alignment.

My teacher, the world-renowned Grandmaster William C. C. Chen, spent months with me in beginner classes, patiently correcting my movements. In a room with fifteen new students, Chen would look into my eyes from twenty feet away, quietly assume my posture, and relax his elbow a half

inch one way or another. I would follow his subtle instruction and suddenly my hand would come alive with throbbing energy as if he had plugged me into a soothing electrical current. His insight into body mechanics seemed magical, but perhaps equally impressive was Chen's humility. Here was a man thought by many to be the greatest living Tai Chi Master in the world, and he patiently taught first-day novices with the same loving attention he gave his senior students.

I learned quickly, and became fascinated with the growth that I was experiencing. Since I was twelve years old I had kept journals of my chess study, making psychological observations along the way—now I was doing the same with Tai Chi.

After about six months of refining my form (the choreographed movements that are the heart of Tai Chi Chuan), Master Chen invited me to join the Push Hands class. This was very exciting, my baby steps toward the martial side of the art. In my first session, my teacher and I stood facing each other, each of us with our right leg forward and the backs of our right wrists touching. He told me to push into him, but when I did he wasn't there anymore. I felt sucked forward, as if by a vacuum. I stumbled and scratched my head. Next, he gently pushed into me and I tried to get out of the way but didn't know where to go. Finally I fell back on old instincts, tried to resist the incoming force, and with barely any contact Chen sent me flying into the air.

Over time, Master Chen taught me the body mechanics of nonresistance. As my training became more vigorous, I learned to dissolve away from attacks while staying rooted to the ground. I found myself calculating less and feeling more, and as I internalized the physical techniques all the

little movements of the Tai Chi meditative form started to come alive to me in Push Hands practice. I remember one time, in the middle of a sparring session I sensed a hole in my partner's structure and suddenly he seemed to leap away from me. He looked shocked and told me that he had been pushed away, but he hadn't noticed any explosive movement on my part. I had no idea what to make of this, but slowly I began to realize the martial power of my living room meditation sessions. After thousands of slow-motion, ever-refined repetitions of certain movements, my body could become that shape instinctively. Somehow in Tai Chi the mind needed little physical action to have great physical effect.

This type of learning experience was familiar to me from chess. My whole life I had studied techniques, principles, and theory until they were integrated into the unconscious. From the outside Tai Chi and chess couldn't be more different, but they began to converge in my mind. I started to translate my chess ideas into Tai Chi language, as if the two arts were linked by an essential connecting ground. Every day I noticed more and more similarities, until I began to feel as if I were studying chess when I was studying Tai Chi. Once I was giving a forty-board simultaneous chess exhibition in Memphis and I realized halfway through that I had been playing all the games as Tai Chi. I wasn't calculating with chess notation or thinking about opening variations . . . I was feeling flow, filling space left behind, riding waves like I do at sea or in martial arts. This was wild! *I was winning chess games without playing chess.*

Similarly, I would be in a Push Hands competition and time would seem to slow down enough to allow me to methodically take apart my opponent's structure and uncover his vulnerability, as in a chess game. My fascination with

consciousness, study of chess and Tai Chi, love for literature and the ocean, for meditation and philosophy, all coalesced around the theme of tapping into the mind's potential via complete immersion into one and all activities. My growth became defined by *barrierlessness.* Pure concentration didn't allow thoughts or false constructions to impede my awareness, and I observed clear connections between different life experiences through the common mode of consciousness by which they were perceived.

As I cultivated openness to these connections, my life became flooded with intense learning experiences. I remember sitting on a Bermuda cliff one stormy afternoon, watching waves pound into the rocks. I was focused on the water trickling back out to sea and suddenly knew the answer to a chess problem I had been wrestling with for weeks. Another time, after completely immersing myself in the analysis of a chess position for eight hours, I had a breakthrough in my Tai Chi and successfully tested it in class that night. Great literature inspired chess growth, shooting jump shots on a New York City blacktop gave me insight about fluidity that applied to Tai Chi, becoming at peace holding my breath seventy feet underwater as a free-diver helped me in the time pressure of world championship chess or martial arts competitions. Training in the ability to quickly lower my heart rate after intense physical strain helped me recover between periods of exhausting concentration in chess tournaments. After several years of cloudiness, I was flying free, devouring information, completely in love with learning.

* * *

Before I began to conceive of this book, I was content to understand my growth in the martial arts in a very abstract

manner. I related to my experience with language like *parallel learning* and *translation of level.* I felt as though I had transferred the essence of my chess understanding into my Tai Chi practice. But this didn't make much sense, especially outside of my own head. What does *essence* really mean anyway? And how does one transfer it from a mental to a physical discipline?

These questions became the central preoccupation in my life after I won my first Push Hands National Championship in November 2000. At the time I was studying philosophy at Columbia University and was especially drawn to Asian thought. I discovered some interesting foundations for my experience in ancient Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, and Greek texts—Upanishadic *essence,* Taoist *receptivity,* Neo-Confucian *principle,* Buddhist *nonduality,* and the Platonic *forms* all seemed to be a bizarre cross-cultural trace of what I was searching for. Whenever I had an idea, I would test it against some brilliant professor who usually disagreed with my conclusions. Academic minds tend to be impatient with abstract language—when I spoke about *intuition,* one philosophy professor rolled her eyes and told me the term had no meaning. The need for precision forced me to think about these ideas more concretely. I had to come to a deeper sense of concepts like *essence, quality, principle, intuition,* and *wisdom* in order to understand my own experience, let alone have any chance of communicating it.

As I struggled for a more precise grasp of my own learning process, I was forced to retrace my steps and remember what had been internalized and forgotten. In both my chess and martial arts lives, there is a method of study that has been critical to my growth. I sometimes refer to it as the study of *numbers to leave numbers,* or *form to leave form.* A basic example

of this process, which applies to any discipline, can easily be illustrated through chess: A chess student must initially become immersed in the fundamentals in order to have any potential to reach a high level of skill. He or she will learn the principles of endgame, middlegame, and opening play. Initially one or two critical themes will be considered at once, but over time the intuition learns to integrate more and more principles into a sense of flow. Eventually the foundation is so deeply internalized that it is no longer consciously considered, but is lived. This process continuously cycles along as deeper layers of the art are soaked in.

Very strong chess players will rarely speak of the fundamentals, but these beacons are the building blocks of their mastery. Similarly, a great pianist or violinist does not think about individual notes, but hits them all perfectly in a virtuoso performance. In fact, thinking about a "C" while playing Beethoven's 5th Symphony could be a real hitch because the flow might be lost. The problem is that if you want to write an instructional chess book for beginners, you have to dig up all the stuff that is buried in your unconscious—I had this issue when I wrote my first book, *Attacking Chess.* In order to write for beginners, I had to break down my chess knowledge incrementally, whereas for years I had been cultivating a seamless integration of the critical information.

The same pattern can be seen when the art of learning is analyzed: themes can be internalized, lived by, and forgotten. I figured out how to learn efficiently in the brutally competitive world of chess, where a moment without growth spells a front-row seat to rivals mercilessly passing you by. Then I intuitively applied my hard-earned lessons to the martial arts. I avoided the pitfalls and tempting divergences that a

learner is confronted with, but I didn't really think about them because the road map was deep inside me—just like the chess principles.

Since I decided to write this book, I have analyzed myself, taken my knowledge apart, and rigorously investigated my own experience. Speaking to corporate and academic audiences about my learning experience has also challenged me to make my ideas more accessible. Whenever there was a concept or learning technique that I related to in a manner too abstract to convey, I forced myself to break it down into the incremental steps with which I got there. Over time I began to see the principles that have been silently guiding me, and a systematic methodology of learning emerged.

My chess life began in Washington Square Park in New York's Greenwich Village, and took me on a sixteen-year-roller-coaster ride, through world championships in America, Romania, Germany, Hungary, Brazil, and India, through every kind of heartache and ecstasy a competitor can imagine. In recent years, my Tai Chi life has become a dance of meditation and intense martial competition, of pure growth and the observation, testing, and exploration of that learning process. I have currently won thirteen Tai Chi Chuan Push Hands National Championship titles, placed third in the 2002 World Championship in Taiwan, and in 2004 I won the Chung Hwa Cup International in Taiwan, the World Championship of Tai Chi Chuan Push Hands.

A lifetime of competition has not cooled my ardor to win, but I have grown to love the study and training above all else. After so many years of big games, performing under pressure has become a way of life. Presence under fire hardly

feels different from the presence I feel sitting at my computer, typing these sentences. What I have realized is that what I am best at is not Tai Chi, and it is not chess—what I am best at is the art of learning. This book is the story of my method.

PART I

THE FOUNDATION

CHAPTER 1

Innocent Moves

I remember the cold late winter afternoon in downtown New York City, my mother and I holding hands while walking to the playground in Washington Square Park. I was six years old, a rough-and-tumble kid with a passion for Spider-Man, sharks, dinosaurs, sports, and driving my parents crazy with mischief. "Too much boy," my mom says. I constantly pestered my dad to throw around a football or baseball or to wrestle in the living room. My friends called me "waste skin" because my knees were often raw from taking spills in the playground or diving for catches. I had an early attraction to the edge, using scraps of wood and cinder blocks from a construction site next door to set up makeshift jump courses for my bike. I refused to wear a helmet until one gorgeous twist ended with a face plant and my mom vowed to no longer wear her headgear when horseback riding unless I followed suit.

We had taken this walk dozens of times. I loved to swing around on the monkey bars and become Tarzan, the world my jungle. But now something felt different. I looked over my shoulder, and was transfixed by mysterious figurines set up on a marble chessboard. I remember feeling like I was

looking into a forest. The pieces were animals, filled with strange potential, as if something dangerous and magical were about to leap from the board. Two park hustlers sat across the table taunting each other. The air was thick with tension, and then the pieces exploded into action, nimble fingers moving with lightning speed and precision, white and black figures darting all over the board, creating patterns. I was pulled into the battlefield, enraptured; something felt familiar about this game, it made sense. Then a crowd gathered around the table and I couldn't see anymore. My mom called me, gently pulled on my hand, and we moved on to the playground.

A few days later my mom and I were walking through the same corner of the park when I broke away from her and ran up to an old man with a grey beard who was setting up plastic pieces on one of the marble boards. That day I had watched a couple of kids playing chess at school and I thought I could do it—"Wanna play?" The old man looked at me suspiciously over his spectacles. My mom apologized, explained that I didn't know how to play chess, but the old man said that it was okay, he had children, and he had a little time to kill. My mom tells me that when the game began my tongue was out and resting on my upper lip, a sure sign I was either stuffed up or concentrating. I remember the strange sensation of discovering a lost memory. As we moved the pieces, I felt like I had done this before. There was a harmony to this game, like a good song. The old man read a newspaper while I thought about my moves, but after a few minutes he got angry and snapped at my mom, accused her of hustling him. Apparently I was playing well.

I had generated an attack by coordinating a few of my pieces and the old man had to buckle down to fight it off.

After a little while a crowd gathered around the board—people were whispering something about "Young Fischer." My mom was confused, a little concerned about what had come over her boy. I was in my own world. Eventually the old man won the game. We shook hands and he asked me my name. He wrote it on his newspaper and said "Josh Waitzkin, I'm gonna read about you in the paper someday."

From that day forward, Washington Square Park became a second home to me. And chess became my first love. After school, instead of hungering for soccer or baseball, I insisted on heading to the park. I'd plop down against some scary-looking dude, put my game face on, and go to war. I loved the thrill of battle, and some days I would play countless speed chess games, hour after hour staring through the jungle of pieces, figuring things out, throwing mental grenades back and forth in a sweat. I would go home with chess pieces flying through my mind, and then I would ask my dad to take down his dusty wooden set and play with me.

Over time, as I became a trusted part of the park scene, the guys took me under their wings, showed me their tricks, taught me how to generate devastating attacks and get into the head of my opponent. I became a protégé of the street, hard to rattle, a feisty competitor. It was a bizarre school for a child, a rough crowd of alcoholics, homeless geniuses, wealthy gamblers hooked on the game, junkies, eccentric artists—all diamonds in the rough, brilliant, beat men, lives in shambles, aflame with a passion for chess.

Every day, unless it poured or snowed, the nineteen marble tables in the southwest corner of Washington Square would fill up with this motley crew. And most days I was there, knocking chessmen over with my short arms, chewing gum, learning the game. Of course my parents thought

long and hard before allowing me to hang out in the park, but I was adamant and the guys cleaned up their acts when I came to play. The cigarettes and joints were put out, the language was cleaned up, few deals went down. I would sit across from one of my buddies, immediately sweating and focused. My mom told me she saw her little boy become an old man when I played chess. I concentrated so hard, she thought her hand would burn if she put it in front of my eyes. It is difficult for me to explain the seriousness I had about chess as a young boy. I guess it was a calling, though I'm still not sure what that means.

After a few months I could already beat a number of the guys who had been playing for decades. When I lost a game, one of my friends would give me a piece of advice—"Josh, you laid back too long, he got comfortable, you gotta go after 'em, make 'em scared" or "Josh, my man, sometimes you gotta castle, get your king to safety, check yourself before you wreck yourself." Then I would hit the clock, buckle down, and try again. Each loss was a lesson, each win a thrill. Every day pieces of the puzzle fell together.

Whenever I showed up to play, big crowds would gather around the table. I was a star in this little world, and while all the attention was exciting for a child, it was also a challenge. I learned quickly that when I thought about the people watching, I played badly. It was hard for a six-year-old ham to ignore throngs of adults talking about him, but when well focused, I seemed to hover in an in-between state where the intensity of the chess position mixed with the rumble of voices, traffic noises, ambulance sirens, all in an inspiring swirl that fueled my mind. Some days I could concentrate more purely in the chaos of Washington Square than in the quiet of my family's living room. Other days I

would look around at everybody, get caught up in their conversations, and play terribly. I'm sure it was frustrating for my parents watching my early discovery of chess—there was no telling whether I'd chew gummy bears, smile, joke, and hang my pieces or buckle down into another world of intensity.

One Saturday afternoon there was a tall figure standing in the crowd while I played speed chess against my friend Jerry. I noticed him, but then fell back into the game. A couple of hours later the man approached my father and introduced himself as Bruce Pandolfini, a master-level player and a chess teacher. Bruce told my dad I was very gifted, and offered to teach me.

It turns out that my father recognized Bruce as the man who did television commentary with Shelby Lyman during the historic Bobby Fischer vs. Boris Spassky World Championship match in 1972. The match had revolutionized chess—it was a cold-war face-off pitting the Soviet World Champion along with his team of one hundred coaches and trainers against the brash renegade American challenger who did all his preparation alone in a room without a view. Fischer was a combination of James Dean and Greta Garbo and America was fascinated.

There were huge political implications to this contest of great thinkers. Increasingly, as the match unfolded, it became perceived as the embodiment of the cold war. Henry Kissinger called Bobby with support; politicians on both sides followed each game closely. The world watched breathless as Shelby and Bruce brought chess to life on television with their human, down-home analysis of the games. When Fischer won the match, he became an international celebrity and chess exploded across America. Suddenly the game

stood shoulder to shoulder with basketball, football, baseball, hockey. Then in 1975 Fischer disappeared instead of defending his title. Chess in America receded into the shadows. Ever since the American chess world has been searching for a new Bobby Fischer, someone to bring the sport back into the limelight.

Shelby and Bruce had captured my dad's imagination twenty years before, and now it was a bit surreal that Bruce was offering to teach his six-year-old bowling ball of a child. I was nonplussed. Chess was fun, and the guys in the park were my buddies. They were teaching me fine. Why should I have any more coaches? I was private about chess, as if it were an intimate fantasy world. I had to trust someone to let them into my thought process, and Bruce had to overcome this shield before the work could begin.

Our first lessons were anything but orthodox. We hardly "studied chess." Bruce knew it was more important for us to get to know one another, to establish a genuine camaraderie. So we talked about life, sports, dinosaurs, things that interested me. Whenever the discussion turned to chess, I was stubborn about my ideas and refused to receive formal instruction.

I insisted on some bad habits I had learned in the park—for example, bringing out my queen early. This is a typical beginner's error: the queen is the most powerful piece on the chessboard so people want to bring her into the action right away. Against unskilled opponents who can't parry simple attacks, this strategy works marvelously. The problem is that since the queen cannot be traded for any of the opponent's pieces without significant loss, she can be chased all over the board while the other guy naturally brings his less valuable but quite potent warriors into play and simultane-

sometimes early mornings, sometimes after school. Most other days, I would go to Washington Square and duke it out with my friends in the park. As a six- and seven-year-old boy I had two powerful currents to my chess education, and the key was to make them coexist peacefully—the street-tough competitor had to fuse with the classically trained, patient player that Bruce was inspiring. Though when very young I was periodically reluctant about real chess work, I loved the sublime beauty of old World Championship games I studied with Bruce—sometimes sitting in silence and calculating an endgame position for twenty minutes would thrill me to the core. But other times such serious thinking would bore me and I'd hunger to play speed chess with my buddies, to attack, to be a little reckless and create beautiful combinations. The park was fun. I was a child after all.

Despite significant outside pressure, my parents and Bruce decided to keep me out of tournaments until I had been playing chess for a year or so, because they wanted my relationship to the game to be about learning and passion first, and competition a distant second. My mother and Bruce were particularly ambivalent about exposing me to the harsh pressures of competitive chess—they gave me some extra months of innocence for which I am grateful. When I finally started playing in scholastic tournaments, soon after my seventh birthday, the games felt easy. Children my own age didn't fashion complicated attacks and defenses like the guys in the park did, and they would crumble under pressure. Some of the kids were armed with dangerous opening traps, memorized variations that could lead to early advantages, so I often came out of the opening down a pawn or two—but then they didn't have a chance. For me, competitive chess was not about perfection. It was more of a mental

prizefight, with two opponents trading advantages, momentum going one way and then the other. My friends in Washington Square were valiant competitors, you could never count them out—in fact they were most dangerous when on the ropes. Many very talented kids expected to win without much resistance. When the game was a struggle, they were emotionally unprepared.

I thrived under adversity. My style was to make the game complex and then work my way through the chaos. When the position was wild, I had huge confidence. Bruce and I also spent a lot of time studying endgames, where the board is nearly empty and high-level principles combine with deep calculations to create fascinating battles. While my opponents wanted to win in the openings, right off the bat, I guided positions into complicated middlegames and abstract endings. So as the game went on, their confidence shrank and I became a predator. Noticing these tendencies, Bruce started calling me "Tiger." He still calls me Tiger today.

My first year of competitive chess was smooth sailing. I felt unbeatable when matched up with kids my age, and the combination of street toughness and classical education proved devastating for my opponents. Perhaps the most decisive element of my game was the way my style on the board was completely in synch with my personality as a child. I was unhindered by internal conflict—a state of being that I have come to see as fundamental to the learning process. Bruce and the park guys had taught me how to express myself through chess, and so my love for the game grew every day.

As the months went by, I piled up win after win and my national rating skyrocketed. I'd show up at a tournament and

kids were terrified of me, which felt strange. I was, after all, a young child who was scared of the dark and loved Scooby-Doo. More than once, opponents started weeping at the board before the game had even begun. I felt bad for them but also empowered. Before I knew it I was the highest-ranked player for my age in the country. The next step was the National Championship, to be held in Charlotte, North Carolina. The guys in the park were buzzing with excitement, showing me more and more weapons, honing my game. I was the hands-down favorite to win the primary division (kindergarten through 3rd grade). There wasn't a doubt in my mind.

CHAPTER 2

Losing to Win

Primary School National Chess Championship
Charlotte, North Carolina
May 5, 1985.

Last round. Board one. Winner takes the title. My opponent and I were set up on a solitary table in front of an unmanned camera that would relay the position to press, coaches, and anxiety-ridden parents in the hotel lobby. The rest of the competitors, over five hundred of the country's top young chess players who had come to battle for the National Championships, faced off on long rows of chessboards filling up the rest of the tense playing hall. The top board is a throne or a prison, depending on how you look at it. Everyone dreams of getting there, but then you arrive and find yourself all alone, trapped on a pedestal with a bull's-eye on your forehead. Entering the tournament, I was the man to beat. I knew teams had been gunning for me, spending months of preparation on treacherous opening traps designed specifically to catch me off guard. But I had already rolled over my first six opponents, giving up only

head off to sea no matter what else was happening in our lives, what crisis was looming, what tournaments I was missing, how out of context or absurd our ocean trips might have felt at the moment of departure. I have come to understand that these little breaks from the competitive intensity of my life have been and still are an integral part of my success. Times at sea are periods of renewal, coming together with family, being with nature, putting things back in perspective. I am able to let my conscious mind move away from my training, and to gain creative new angles on the next steps of my growth. These trips are a far cry from luxurious vacations—actually they are nonstop manual labor, sweating in the engine room trying to coax an old generator back to life, working the cockpit in the hot sun, keeping the boat together in angry squalls, navigating through big seas, living right on the edge.

The boating life has also been a wonderful training ground for performance psychology. Living on the water requires constant presence, and the release of control. A boat is always moving with the sea, lurching beneath your feet, and the only way to survive is to sink into rhythm with the waves and be ready for anything. I learned at sea that virtually all situations can be handled as long as presence of mind is maintained. On the other hand, if you lose your calm when crisis hits seventy miles from land, or while swimming with big sharks, there is no safety net to catch you.

There have been many years when leaving my New York life felt like career suicide—my chess rivals were taking lessons and competing in every weekend tournament while I was on a boat crashing through big waves. But I would come back with new ideas and a full tank of energy and determination. The ocean has always healed me, brought me

back to life when I have needed it . . . and as an eight-year-old child in the midst of an existential crisis, I needed it.

My parents, baby sister, and I left Fort Lauderdale on the *Ebb Tide,* our twenty-four-foot Black Fin, a wonderful old fishing boat that carried us through many summer adventures in high seas until she blew up and sank when I was twelve. Fifty-seven miles east southeast was Bimini, an island that was like home to me. I can still see her coming into sight through my childhood eyes, those hazy first trees like a miracle after a long ocean crossing. We didn't talk about chess for weeks. We fished, dove in warm crystal-clear water, trolled the Gulf Stream, breathed in the beautiful southern air. I rediscovered myself as a child, ran around the island with my friends Kier and Kino, passed countless hours with my head hanging off our rickety old dock, hand line dangling in the water, watching the fish dart around. On rainy evenings, my mom and I would take our dog Brownie and go into the jungle, hunting for giant land crab. My family reconnected as human beings, outside of the mad swirl of scholastic chess. I was devastated, but slowly my parents revived my boyish enthusiasm for life.

In painful times, my mom has always been an anchor, holding everything together until the clouds roll by. When I was a child, she would press her soft cheek against mine, reminding me that I didn't always have to be so tough. I didn't have to tell her how I felt—she knew. My mother is the greatest person I have ever known. She is a brilliant, loving, compassionate woman with a wisdom that to this day blows my mind. Quietly powerful, infinitely supportive, absurdly selfless, she has always encouraged me to follow my heart even when it led far away or to seemingly bizarre pursuits. She is also incredibly brave (sometimes to my dismay),

facing down four-hundred-pound sharks in deep ocean, hand-lining leaping blue marlin, taming wild two-thousand-pound stallions, breaking up street fights, keeping my dad and me in line. She has been a constant balancing force throughout all the madness of our lives—lifting us when we were down, providing perspective when we got too swept away by ambition, giving a hug when tears flowed. My mom is my hero. Without her the whole thing falls apart.

My father is a different type of character. He's a loyal, emotional, eccentric (think Woody Allen meets Larry David with an adventurous spin), devoted dad who has been my best friend since day one. I can't imagine how many hours we have spent together, playing basketball, throwing around footballs and baseballs, scouring ocean horizons for birds above schooling fish, traveling to chess tournaments and then martial arts championships all over the world. We have been an elite team since I was six years old and subsequently have been joined at the hip in our ambitions and, to a certain extent, our emotions. No matter how much perspective we tried to maintain, our senses of well-being often fluctuated with my competitive results. There was no way around this. After winning huge tournaments, all was well and the sky was the limit. When I was playing badly, everything could look bleak and our dreams absurd.

It is true that I played with the knowledge that my dad's heart was on the line side by side with my own—but I also knew that he would love me regardless of the outcome. There is little question that some psychologists would frown upon such co-dependence between father and son, but when you are pursuing the pinnacle sometimes limits must be pushed. There are big games, climactic moments, final surges where you dig for energy and inspiration wherever

you can find it and pick up the pieces later. One thing is for sure—through thick and thin, my dad has always been in my corner 100 percent.

After a month on Bimini, my pop got restless and arranged a match between me and the best chess player on the island. He was worried that I was taking too long away from the game, and also he was just itching to see me play again. I wasn't so eager for the match, preferring to fish with my hand line and go diving for lobster. Chess was still a burden to me, but the idea of the Championship of Bimini sounded harmless and amusing. We tracked down the guy and faced off in a bar. He had gold teeth, and a huge gold necklace hanging down over the board—remnants of a drug-smuggling past. It took me a few minutes to get into the games but then I came alive, the old love trickling back. I recall the feeling of inevitability, like chess was part of me, not to be denied. Something steeled in my eight-year-old self that summer—I wouldn't go out a loser.

When I got home in the fall, Bruce was preoccupied with book deadlines and had no time for me. He cancelled lesson after lesson, which felt like a terrible slap in the face. I had lost and now my teacher didn't like me. The equation was simple. When we did meet, his mind was elsewhere and the lessons were technical and alienating. Maybe he was busy, but I was a kid in need.

I also transferred from the Little Red School House to the prestigious Dalton School on the upper east side of Manhattan. The transition was difficult—instead of a few blocks from home, school was now a long bus ride away. I missed my friends at Little Red and felt out of place with all the rich kids at Dalton. I remember the first time a couple of us went over to my new friend's apartment uptown and I

our minds? Often subtle differences in parental or instructional style can make a huge difference. Entity theorists tend to have been told that they did well when they have succeeded, and that they weren't any good at something when they have failed. So a kid aces a math test, comes home, and hears "Wow, that's my boy! As smart as they come!" Then, next week Johnny fails an English test and hears "What's wrong with you? Can't you read?" or "Your Mommy never liked reading either—obviously, it's not your thing." So the boy figures he's good at math and bad at English, and what's more, he links success and failure to ingrained ability. Learning theorists, on the other hand, are given feedback that is more process-oriented. After doing well on an English essay, a little girl might be congratulated by her teacher with "Wow, great job Julie! You're really becoming a wonderful writer! Keep up the good work!" And if she does badly on a math test, her teacher might write "Study a little harder for the next one and you'll do great! And feel free to ask me questions any time after class, that's what I'm here for!" So Julie learns to associate effort with success and feels that she can become good at anything with some hard work. She also feels as though she is on a journey of learning, and her teacher is a friendly assistant in her growth. Johnny thinks he's good at math and bad at English, and he focuses on quick results as opposed to long-term process—but what happens when he does badly on a hard math test down the line? Will he be prepared to learn the right lessons from life's inevitable challenges? Unfortunately, he may not.

It is clear that parents and teachers have an enormous responsibility in forming the theories of intelligence of their students and children—and it is never too late. It is critical to realize that we can always evolve in our approaches

new coach, Chilean International Master Victor Frias, who in time would become a very dear friend of my family. Breaking from Bruce felt like losing a part of myself.

That same year, my father's brutally honest book *Searching for Bobby Fischer* was released around the world. It was a beautifully written account of our journey together during my rise to winning my first national title and years later it would inspire the Paramount film of the same name. I was already well-known in the chess world, but now I was really out there, which put some extra pressure on my shoulders. I went on all the television shows with my awkward adolescent afro and goofy smile. Jane Pauley on *The Today Show* asked me whether I wanted to be like Bobby Fischer. Just then the music started playing, which meant I had five seconds to answer, and I knew Bobby Fischer was crazy so I came out with the brilliant closer: "No, I never want to be like Bobby Fischer, *again.*" Again? What is this kid talking about?

I was having a great time and was just innocent enough to avoid being messed up by the spotlight. I dove deeper and deeper into chess. Of course there were plateaus, periods when my results leveled off while I internalized the information necessary for my next growth spurt, but I didn't mind. I had a burning love for chess and so I pushed through the rocky periods with a can-do attitude. I became a Chess Master a few days after turning thirteen, beating Fischer's mark of thirteen years five months. People were saying that I was a future World Champion, but I didn't hear them. I was a competitor who knew winning and losing and the hair's breadth between. My rivals didn't care about reputation—they just wanted to crush me and I had to keep it real.

There were a few powerful moments that reinforced my young notion that glory had little to do with happiness or