



BOOK REVIEWS



A Love for Learning

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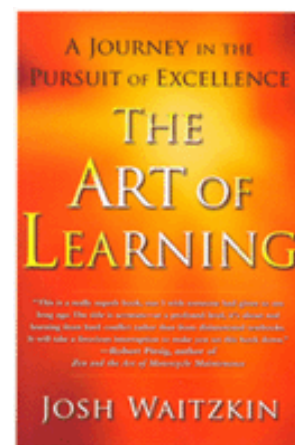
The Art of Learning, by Josh Waitzkin, 2007 Free Press, Hardcover, 265pp., \$25.00

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.

So writes Josh Waitzkin in the introduction to his new book *The Art of Learning*. These words, mind you, come from an international master with eight national chess championships to his name, and even more national and world championships in his martial arts career.

And I agree with him wholeheartedly. The art of learning is his thing.

This is a book that will make you pause and reflect. I read it from cover to cover, and then I read it again. I made notes, recording key remarks and explanations, and important moments. I was searching for the most crucial, revealing parts of the book to reproduce for this review, and my list grew to sixteen pages of material.



Some books, particularly instructional texts, build upon a foundation of basic concepts such that comprehension of later chapters depends upon absorbing material from earlier chapters. This is such a book. Waitzkin puts forth examples and analogies that he refers to over and over. He explains the basic building blocks of his philosophy of learning and dealing with adversity and then gradually melds them into a single, comprehensive worldview that is now at the core of his being. Not unlike the chess master who develops his pieces and controls the center, and then acquires subtle positional gains in the middlegame, culminating in precise endgame technique to wrap up victory. One stage flows seamlessly into the next.

Waitzkin manages to do this using the platforms of chess and Tai Chi, his chosen martial art, combining a riveting autobiography and eye-opening instructional and motivational material at the same time. These two layers take turns coming to the forefront, but ultimately join as one.

A perceptive chess player or Tai Chi practitioner will find his or her abilities enhanced by applying the principles in this book, but so will the Frisbee throwers or the cardiac surgeons or the gardeners. Waitzkin's theories about the learning process are independent of the specific discipline involved.

The contents are divided as follows:

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The introduction should not be overlooked. It provides a quick overview of both his chess and Tai Chi careers and begins to explain to the curious reader what led Waitzkin ultimately to leave the world of competitive chess. It also immediately demonstrates the author's ability to draw his reader in:

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, '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.

Part I: The Foundation is devoted to his chess career. Those who are familiar with the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* may notice the play on words regarding the first chapter's name "Innocent Moves," as this was the title of the European release of the movie.

Waitzkin reveals an intriguing anecdote from his earliest chess days. He was six years old and walking through Washington Square Park in Manhattan with his mother. Spotting an elderly man sitting at one of the park's chess tables, Josh ran over and asked, "Wanna play?" The book picks up the story:

The old man looked at me suspiciously over his spectacles. My mom apologized, explained that I didn't know how to play chess.

As the game began, Josh says:

I remember the strange sensation of discovering a lost memory. As we moved the pieces, I felt like I had done this before. ... 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.

As the young boy returned again and again to the park, the local chess hustlers took him under their wings, guiding him with aphorisms such as “Get your king to safety, check yourself before you wreck yourself.” Two years later, Josh was the highest-rated eight-year-old in the country and entered the 1985 Primary School National Championship, fully expecting to win. Knowing he would win.

He didn't. He writes:

One of the problems with being too high is that there is a long way to fall.

After this loss, Josh spent a good part of the summer away from chess but came back renewed and enthusiastic:

It might seem absurd, but I believe that year, from eight to nine, was the defining period of my life. I responded to heartbreak with hard work. I was self-motivated and moved by a powerful resolve...Now there was the knowledge of my mortality.

Responding to heartbreak with hard work. Waitzkin returns to this theme repeatedly in *The Art of Learning*. He later writes:

The vast majority of motivated people, young and old, make terrible mistakes in their approach to learning. They fall frustrated by the wayside while those on the road to success keep steady on their paths.

Why does this happen? Josh describes a fundamental difference in learning attitudes: what he refers to as *entity* and *learning* theories. He says that kids influenced by the entity approach:

Are prone to use language like 'I am smart at this' and to attribute their success or failure to an ingrained and unalterable level of ability. They see their overall intelligence or skill level at a certain discipline to be a fixed entity, a thing that cannot evolve.

On the other hand, kids influenced by the learning approach:

Are more prone to describe their results with sentences like 'I got it because I worked very hard at it' or 'I should have tried harder.' A child with a learning theory of intelligence tends to sense that with hard work, difficult material can be grasped – step by step, incrementally, the novice can become the master...Children who associate success with hard work tend to have a 'mastery-oriented response' to challenging situations, while children who see themselves as just plain 'smart' or 'dumb,' or 'good' or 'bad' at something, have a learned helplessness orientation.

Hard work and a firm resolve are the keys. If life brings you lemons, make lemonade. Waitzkin explains:

In my experience, successful people shoot for the stars, put their hearts on the line in every battle...In the long run, painful losses may prove much more valuable than wins...Of course, the real challenge is to stay in range of this long-term perspective when you are under fire and hurting in the middle of the war. This, maybe our biggest hurdle, is at the core of the art of learning.

However, Waitzkin doesn't limit himself to flowing generalities. He gets specific, names names, and writes with the same intensity with which he lives his life.

There are numerous chess lessons the interested reader will find, although there isn't a single chess diagram in the book. For example, he comes down very hard against having students concentrate the bulk of their chess study on openings. “Why not start from the beginning?” one might ask.

The answer is quicksand ... Lifetimes can be spent memorizing and keeping up with the evolving Encyclopedia of Chess Openings (ECO). They are an addiction, with perilous psychological effects. It is a little like developing the habit of stealing the test from your teacher's desk instead of learning how to do the math. You may pass the test, but you learn absolutely nothing.

Most of my early rivals were gifted children, and they were prepared with hundreds of traps with which they could win right off the bat. Playing against these kids was like walking through a minefield, but I was good enough on my feet to navigate most of the danger. I often came out of the openings in a little bit of trouble, but then I took control. As our games progressed, my opponents moved away from their area of comfort while I grew stronger and more confident. They wanted to win before the battle began, but I loved the struggle that was the heart of chess. In both the short term and the long term, these kids were crippled [by their primary focus on opening study].

Waitzkin also wades into the mysterious field of psychological warfare both at and away from the chessboard. He sheepishly describes how, as a seven-year-old, he would occasionally bait an opponent into overconfidence by making a move which set a trap, followed by “groaning and slapping my head.” Later, such psychological ploys became much more subtle, but with the same purpose:

In addition to the moves I made on the board, I was posing another set of conundrums for an opponent to ponder.

At the same time, I was a careful observer of my rivals' rhythms....If, over dinner, a Grandmaster tastes something bitter and faintly wrinkles his nose, there might be an inkling of a tell lurking. Impatience while standing on line at the buffet might betray a problem sitting with tension.

He even states:

It's amazing how much you can learn about someone when they get caught in the rain! Some will run with their hands over their heads, others will smile and take a deep breath while enjoying the wind. What does this say about one's relationship to discomfort? The reaction to surprise? The need for control?

Waitzkin also painfully recalls the tension he experienced while training with a well-known chess instructor whose approach apparently was to force all of his students into the same cookie-cutter approach.

I found these sessions to be resonant of Orwell's prison scenes in 1984, where independently minded thinkers were ruthlessly broken down until all that was left was a shell of a person...Instead of following my instincts, my coach urged me to ask myself, 'What would Karpov do here?' But Karpov had cold blood and mine boiled. When he searched for tiny strategic advantages, I yearned for wild dynamics. As I tried to play in the style that pleased my coach, chess began to feel alien.

This experience clearly shook Waitzkin to the core. “The effects of moving away from my natural voice as a competitor were particularly devastating,” he writes. Throughout the book he stresses the need to find ways to grow while remaining true to one's nature.

Waitzkin also offers suggestions for dealing with distracting noises, with cheating players, and how to avoid the downward spiral of one error begetting another, all taken from his real-life experiences.



Josh Waitzkin vs. "Buffalo," Taiwan 2004

Part II of the book describes Josh's entry into martial arts. Particularly liberating for him was the opportunity to begin fresh, as an absolute novice. He says:

I was a beginner, a child learning to crawl, and the world began to lift off my shoulders... There were no television cameras, no fans, no suffocating pressure.

He describes what happened in his initial Push Hands class:

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.

Waitzkin then began to apply himself intently, utilizing some of the lessons he had learned from his time in chess. As he puts it:

The theme is depth over breadth. The learning principle is to plunge into the detailed mystery of the micro in order to understand what makes the macro tick... This is similar to my early study of chess, where I explored endgame positions of reduced complexity – for example king and pawn against king, only three pieces on the board – in order to touch high-level principles such as the power of empty space, zugzwang (where any move of the opponent will destroy his position), tempo, or structural planning. Once I experienced these principles, I could apply them to complex positions because they were in my mental framework.

After only two years of work, Josh won his first national Push Hands Championship in November 2000. He explains that "Surely many of my opponents knew more about Tai Chi than I did, but I was very good at what I did know."

Part III: Bringing It All Together delves deeper, with practical examples showing how the basic building blocks Waitzkin has already outlined fit together into a cohesive unit. In chapter sixteen, Josh gives us an inside look at the lessons he learned at the facility now known as the Human Performance Institute and how he applied them. The information in this chapter alone could form the basis for a weekend-long seminar on performance enhancement and is worth many times the cost of the entire book.

There is much more content to *The Art of Learning* than can be adequately covered in a brief review, but Waitzkin presents such topics as successfully dealing with setbacks and anger, the esoteric roles of the conscious and unconscious mind, and the rather amazing effects of physical cardiovascular interval training in clearing both mind and body.

The cycle of stress and recovery plays an important role. In a message applicable to parents of young chess players, he says that the “tendency of competitors to exhaust themselves between rounds of tournaments is surprisingly widespread and very self-destructive. Whenever I visit scholastic chess events today, I see coaches trying to make themselves feel useful or showing off for parents by teaching students long technical lessons immediately following a two-hour game and an hour before the next round. Let the kid rest!”

The book ends with a riveting play-by-play account of his attempt to capture not one, but two world championship Push Hands titles in Taiwan in December 2004, and the efforts of tournament officials to thwart him. I won't give the ending away, but suffice it to say that Waitzkin's account will keep you on the edge of your seat.

In the brief Afterword, Josh writes:

It is my hope that you, the reader, emerge from this book inspired and perhaps a bit more enabled to follow your dreams in a manner that is consistent with the unique gifts you bring to the table.

The reader whose heart beats with ambition and a drive for excellence can't help but be moved by this book. Waitzkin writes with clarity and passion, in an articulate and engaging manner. He lays it all out, his triumphs and his failures. If you're looking for mind-numbing entertainment, turn on the television. When you're no longer willing to accept mediocrity in your life, pick up *The Art of Learning*.

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by Josh Waitzkin

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