

BRUCE HEITLER
GWHS 1963

I must have learned some math in the class Mr. Hoffman taught in 1961-2 during my junior year at George Washington High School. Something like 11 out of 19 students in that class got 800, a perfect score, on our SAT Achievement tests. But in retrospect, it was not the math that made the most lasting impression, but the pedagogy.

Whether in math or in tennis, Irwin Hoffman knew how to harness competition. Competition, like its slightly less twisted sister, ambition, is a cruel and dangerous impulse — especially for adolescents. Many of us in the Reform Jewish community of East Denver had seen ambition consume and oppress our families, distress our older siblings, and we sensed its consuming flames licking at our own souls. In athletics at GW, city and even state championships were expected from many teams, and many fulfilled their promise. In academic competition, including debate, National Merit competition, and admission to top colleges, GW was unrivaled among Colorado high schools.

Perhaps it was from tennis that Mr. Hoffman knew that ambition works better as a function a group, that its sharp blade can be contained in a vessel of play, that ambition for one's colleague is often healthier than ambition for individual accomplishment, and that teaching is the best way to learn.

Whether it came from Mr. Hoffman, or from the irreverence of the times and the familiar composition of our class, the cruel edge of competition was frequently tempered with humor. Healthy ambition marries competitive and collaborative activity, and that can spark laughter. After all, on the tennis court and in math class, your opponent is also your partner. Relentless dedication to defeating the opponent ruins the game, since no one wants to play with you. For many of us, the same lessons that were practiced learning mathematics would also form the foundations of our married life.

Mr. Hoffman would have students explain a difficult concept or proof. When a student was struggling, Mr. Hoffman would ask another student to help him along — to the benefit of both because the clarity that was required to explain a concept sharpened the understanding of the teaching student as well as the learning student. Competition was frequently a group effort. Even grading homework assignments was allocated to students. I remember papers graded by students full of colorful praise, and even decorated with glitter when a particularly difficult problem was solved.

In this way, the dangerously sharp edge of the competitive impulse was co-opted. Competition nourished mutual support. Everyone needed help sometimes, and that support came from a fellow student as much as from the teacher. The competitive groupings would shift, so one's partner one day would be an adversary the next. Perhaps this supported the humor of the enterprise; it certainly increased my admiration for the clear thinking, creativity and different abilities among that extraordinary group of young students.

—Bruce Heitler
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After attending law school at Yale, I practiced law momentarily and realized that I would rather have a lawyer than be one. I have tried made a living as a real estate developer and consultant, specializing in near downtown, multi-family, mixed-use development in Denver. I have conducted classes in moral reasoning using ancient Hebrew texts for high school students for over 25 years, and lead three groups studying the Babylonian Talmud each week. Married over 40 years, Susan and I have 11 grandchildren and, God willing, more on the way.