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Josh Waitzkin's last update on March 17, 2020 has led a full life as a chess master and international martial arts champion, and by this writing he is not yet 35. The Art of Learning: An Inner Journey to Optimal Performance chronicles his journey from the chess prodigy (and the subject of the film Search for Bobby Fischer) to the Tai Chi Chuan world championship with important lessons identified and explained along the way. Marketing expert Seth Godin has written and said that one must decide to change three things as a result of reading a business book; the reader will find many lessons in Waitzkin's volume. Waitzkin has a list of principles that appear throughout the book, but it's not always clear exactly what the principles are and how they relate to each other. This doesn't really hurt the readability of the book, though, and is at best a minor inconvenience. There are many lessons for the educator or leader, and as someone who teaches college, was president of the chess club in high school, and who started studying martial arts about two years ago, I found the book engaging, encouraging, and instructive. Waitzkin's chess career began among the crooks of New York's Washington Square, and he learned how to concentrate between the noise and distractions that this brings. This experience taught him the inside and out of aggressive chess-playing, as well as the importance of endurance from the cage players with whom he interacted. He was discovered in Washington Square by chess teacher Bruce Pantolfini, who became his first coach and developed him from a tremendous talent to one of the best young players in the world. The book presents Waitzkin's life as a study in contrasts; perhaps this is deliberate given Waitzkin's admitted fascination with Eastern philosophy. Among the most useful lessons concern the aggression of park chess players and the young wonders who brought their queens into action early or set elaborate traps and then pounced on the mistakes of opponents. These are excellent ways to quickly send weaker players, but it doesn't build stamina or skill. It contrasts these approaches with attention to detail leading to real knowledge in the long run. According to Waitzkin, an unfortunate reality in chess and martial arts-and perhaps by extension in education-is that people learn many superficial and sometimes impressive tricks and techniques without developing a subtle, subtle command of fundamental principles. Tricks and traps can impress (or eliminate) reliability, but they are of limited utility against someone who really knows what he or she is doing. Strategies based on quick checkmates are likely to falter against players who To divert attacks and get one in a long middle game. Smashing junior players with four-move checkmates is superficially satisfying, but it does little to one's best game. He offers a kid as a joke who won a lot of games against inferior opposition but who refused to embrace the real real for a long series of wins over clearly inferior players (p. 36-37). This reminds me of advice I got from a friend recently: always try to make sure you're the dumbest person in the room, so you're always learning. Many of us, however, derive our value from being big fish in small ponds. Waitzkin's conversations cast chess as a spiritual boxing match, and it's especially appropriate given his discussion of martial arts later in the book. Those familiar with boxing will remember Muhammad Ali's strategy against George Foreman in the 1970s: Foreman was a heavy hitter, but never had it in a long period before. Ali won with his rope-a-dope strategy, patiently absorbing Foreman's blows and waiting for Foreman to exhaust himself. His lesson from chess is apt (p. 34-36) as he discusses promising young players who have focused more heavily on winning quickly than on developing their games. Waitzkin builds on these stories and contributes to the understanding of learning in chapter two, discussing the entity and gradual approaches to learning. The theorists of the entity believe that things are innate. So one can play chess or do karate or be an economist because he or she was born to do so. Therefore, failure is deeply personal. On the contrary, incremental theorists see losses as opportunities: step by step, gradually, the beginner can become the master (p. 30). They come to the occasion when presented with difficult material because their approach is geared towards controlling something over time. The entity's theorists are collapsing under pressure. Waitzkin contradicts his approach, in which he spent a lot of time dealing with end-of-game strategies, where both players had very few pieces. Instead, he said many young students start by learning a wide range of opening variations. This ruined their games in the long run: (m) any very talented guys are expected to win without much resistance. When the game was a match, they were emotionally unprepared. For some of us, stress becomes a source of paralysis and mistakes are the beginning of a downward spiral (p. 60, 62). As Waitzkin argues, however, a different approach is necessary to achieve our full potential. A fatal flaw of shock-and-awe, blitzkrieg approach to chess, martial arts, and ultimately anything to learn is that anything can be learned from rote. Waitzkin taunts martial arts professionals who become form collectors with fancy kicks and twirls that have absolutely no martial value (p. 117). One could say the same thing about the sets of problems. This is not about winning Waitzkin's basic principles-focus in Tai Chi was to perfect some fundamental principles (p. 117)-but there is a profound difference between technical competence and real understanding. Knowing the moves is one thing, but knowing how to determine what to do next is quite another. Waitzkin's strong focus on refined basic principles and processes meant that he remained strong later, while opponents withered. His approach to martial arts is summed up in this passage (p. 123): I had condensed my body mechanics into a strong state, while most of my opponents had large, elegant and relatively practical repertoires. The fact is that when there is intense competition, those who succeed have slightly more honed skills than the rest. It is rarely a mysterious technique that leads us to the top, but rather a deep knowledge of what may well be a basic skill set. Depth beats every day of the week, because it opens a channel for the intangible, unconscious, creative components of our hidden possibilities. It's much more than smelling of blood in the water. In chapter 14, he discusses the illusion of mysticism, by which something is so clearly internalized that almost imperceptibly small movements are incredibly powerful, as embodied in this passage by Wu Yu-hsiang, writing in the nineteenth century: If the opponent does not move, then they do not move. At the slightest move of the opponent, I move first. A learning view of intelligence means linking effort to success through a process of teaching and encouragement (p. 32). In other words, genetics and raw talent can only get you so far before the hard work has been getting loose (p. 37). Another useful lesson concerns the use of adversity (see p. 132-33). Waitzkin suggests using a problem in one area to adapt and strengthen other areas. I have a personal example to support it. I'll always regret giving up basketball in high school. I remember my sophomore-last year playing-I broke my thumb and, instead of focusing on cardiovascular conditioning and other aspects of my game (like working with my left hand), I waited to recover before I got back to work. Waitzkin offers another useful chapter titled Slowing Down Time in which he discusses ways to sharpen and harness intuition. It discusses the process of chunking, which is partitioning problems into progressively larger problems until one makes a complex set of calculations implicitly, without having to think about it. His technical example of chess is particularly instructive in the footnote on page 143. A great chess teacher has been internalized a lot for tracks and scripts; the great teacher can process a much larger amount of information with less effort than an expert. Knowledge is the process of turning the modular into intuitive. There is a lot that will be familiar to people who read books like this, such as the need to pace himself, set clearly defined goals, the need to relax, techniques to get in the zone, and so on. The anecdotes show his points beautifully. During the book, he presents his methodology for getting into the zone, another concept that people in performance-based professions will find useful. It calls it the soft zone (chapter three), and consists of being flexible, supple, and able to adapt to circumstances. Martial artists and David Allen getting things done could recognize this as having a mind like water. It contrasts with the hard zone, which requires a collaborative world to function. Like a dry branch, you are fragile, ready to button under pressure (p. 54). The Soft Zone is resilient, like a flexible blade of grass that can move with and survive the winds that were blowing with the force of the hurricane (p. 54). Another image refers to making sandals if one is faced with a trip to a field of thorns (p. 55). Neither bases success on a submissive world or an overpowering power, but on intelligent preparation and cultivated resilience (p. 55). A lot here will be known to creative people: you try to think, but that one song from this one band keeps blowing away in your head. Waitzkin's only option was to make peace with noise (p. 56). In the language of economics, restrictions are given; We can't choose them. This is explored in more detail in Chapter 16. He discusses the top performers, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and others who are not obsessed over the latest failure and who know how to relax when needed (p. 179). The experience of NFL quarterback Jim Harbaugh is also useful, as the more he could let things go while the defense was on the field, the sharper it was on the next drive (p. 179). Waitzkin discusses further things he learned while experimenting in human performance, particularly in relation to cardiovascular interval training, which can have a profound effect on your ability to quickly release tension and recover from mental exhaustion (p. 181). It's that last concept-to-recover from mental exhaustion-that's likely what most academics need help with. There's a lot here about overstepping the bounds; However, one must earn the right to do so: as Waitzkin writes, Jackson Pollock could draw like a camera, but instead chose to splash color in a wild way that pulsed with emotion (p. 85). This is another good lesson for academics, principals and teachers. Waitzken emphasizes the close attention to detail when taking the instruction, particularly from Tai Chi's trainer William C.C. Chen. Tai Chi is not about offering resistance or strength, but about the ability to mix with (the opponent's) energy, succumb to it, and overcome it with softness (p. 103). The book is filled with stories of people who did not reach their potential because they did not seize opportunities for improvement or because they refused to adapt to the conditions. This lesson is highlighted in chapter 17, where he discusses making sandals when faced with a thorny path, like a sneaky The book offers various principles by which we can become better teachers, scholars and directors. The celebration of the results should be secondary to the celebration of the processes that produced these results (p. 45-47). There's also a study in contrasts starting on page 185, and it's something I've struggled to learn. Waitzkin shows himself in on be able to relax between matches while some of his opponents were pressured to analyze their games in the meantime. This leads to extreme mental fatigue: this tendency of competitors to run out between tournament rounds is surprisingly widespread and very self-destructive (p. 186). The Art of Learning has a lot to teach us regardless of our field. I found it particularly relevant given the profession I chose and my decision to start studying martial arts when I started teaching. Knowledge is numerous and workable, and the fact that Waitzkin has used the principles he now teaches to become a world-class competitor to two very demanding competitive companies makes it much easier to read. I recommend this book to anyone in a leadership position or in a position that requires extensive learning and adaptation. I mean, I recommend this book to everyone. More on LearningFeatured photo credit: Jazmin Quaynor via unsplash.com unsplash.com