

Winning Back Our Culture

- Good evening, brothers. Tonight my presentation will be about winning instead of losing. Before last month, I would have never even considered sharing anything with you that had to do with competition.
- “Why is that?” you may be wondering. Because over the last 18 years or so, I have gradually lost almost all interest in competitions of any type.
- When I was younger I certainly enjoyed the competition of team sports. Whether it was high school football or intramural softball, I was always glad to join my meager talents and skills with a team of friends for a lively and sporting game against other friends.
- Later in life, after Nancy and I started raising our family, we enjoyed teaching our kids how to play sports. We also enjoyed family time by playing board games or simple card games.
- But as our kids matured and I started getting older, my interest in competitive activities began to wane. At first it was with sporting competitions. I assumed that as sports got more physically demanding and I really couldn’t compete well, my desire for competition died. But that really isn’t it.
- Most of my kids are out on their own now. When we have family gatherings they still want to play board games as a family activity. Now, I hesitantly agree to play some games that I like, but I have little desire for playing most games and less desire for playing to win.
- Many times I sit out and just watch them play, or I do something else. This is a selfish thing to do, but I just do not enjoy playing games any longer.
- On one occasion after turning down an invitation to play, I went away to a quiet place and reflected on my motives for not playing. What I realized about myself is that I’m not fitting in well with the current culture of competition in our modern society.
- In organized sports, especially at the professional level, there is too much public focus on star players and less on the formation of the team. Too many resources and too much attention are spent on the few players expected to pull a team through a game or a season.
- There is greater value placed on idolized individuality than on the common good. This has a long term negative impact on teamwork.
- Additionally, in sports at all levels, it seems that there is too much smack talk. When I was a kid and young adult, there was always a little banter between teams once in a while to liven the competition. But in our current cultural climate, this now feels like it has evolved into a deliberate and antagonistic tactic to gain a psychological edge. That’s not fun.
- The large scale acceptance of this has spilled over into many other aspects of competition, even board games and cards. More and more there seems to be an air of psychological edginess to simple games of fun with purposefully placed verbal jabs, needling comments or negative remarks about bad plays.

- But this heightened sense of edginess in the games of our culture is nothing compared to the virulent, all out war with words now infused into all other serious aspects of our society.
- The political arena is now about a struggle for power between two highly polarized political parties instead of a process for balancing different perspectives for the good governance of our country.
- Nearly every hot button issue in our culture has become a fierce competition of half-truths and emotional accusations that attempt to sway popular opinion toward one incomplete solution over another. There appears to be little effort or space for civil debate that relies on verifiable facts and even less desire for an attitude of collaborative problem solving.
- The all-or-nothing attitude for addressing the issues of our time has corrupted our national news industry. There is so much misinformation being thrown about by corporate media companies, social media, and special interest lobbies that most people are not sure what news stories to believe. This is probably the most dangerous cultural change for our country in modern times.
- I am sorry to bring focus to these negative aspects of our society in what should be an uplifting end to our meeting. Maybe you can understand why I have come to retreat from anything that feels like a competitive environment, even board games with my kids.
- But there is hope! My kids have not given up on me. A couple of months ago they introduced me to a new game called Hanabi.
- What is unique about this game is that it does not pit the players against each other. It actually requires all of the players to collaborate with one another to win the game.
- Let me tell you a little about this game. Hanabi is the Japanese word for fireworks. The premise of the game is that all the players have to work together to put on a spectacular fireworks display.
- It is played by 3 to 5 players. There are 50 colorful cards, which are more like stubby, thick dominoes that can stand on edge. There are 5 suits with multiple cards numbered 1 to 5.
- The players have to repetitively take turns building up a full display of fireworks using each colored suit in numerical order. If a full display of 25 cards is constructed before the game ends, everyone wins.
- This sounds like it could be easy, but it is not. There are several parameters and rules of the game designed to make it exceedingly difficult.
- All of the cards lie face down in a collection that the players draw from. Each player draws 4 cards, but they do not get to look at them. Instead, the cards are placed on the table facing away from the player who drew them. No player sees his own cards, but each player sees the cards that everyone else holds.
- Each player in turn takes one of three actions. They can place one of their cards on the display field, or discard from their hand, or give another player information about his hand.

- These clues are limited to telling the other player either the color or the numerical value of a card or group of cards. This doesn't seem difficult either, but one of the parameters of the game limits the total number of clues that can be given during the game.
- Often players have to take risks by making plays with little or no information about their hand. After a piece is played on the field or discarded, the player draws a new card to replenish his or her hand.
- Additionally, there are only 3 misfires allowed during the entire game for playing cards on the display field. If more than 3 mistakes are made in playing suits in numerical order, the game ends immediately in a loss.
- The game will end in a win if all 25 cards are played in numerical order. Or the game will end with a suboptimal outcome if less than 25 cards have been played by the time the draw pile has been depleted.
- This is a difficult game to win. I have played it five or six times and the best we have been able to do is get 24 of the cards on the display field.
- It is not impossible to win. The team improves their potential for winning by discussing strategies and agreed upon norms before the game starts. These norms typically address:
 - How new cards are positioned in the players' hands
 - How cards are played or discarded from the hand, and
 - The conditions for giving clues to other players
- The only chance for winning is to create an air of predictability for how each player decides what to play or discard given the very limited information known about his or her hand.
- I really enjoy this game because we work together to beat the game. It is not antagonistic. It requires each person to have a sustained attitude of making the best possible decisions for the good of the team.
- Everyone listens carefully to the clues given to them as well as those given to all other players. This allows each player to make the best decisions for the action they will take in light of anticipating the actions to come from the other players.
- This game drives you to think strategically and to be disciplined in following the team norms that will improve the potential to win.
- By the end of the game, everyone has made a bad decision or two for lack of information about their hand, so no one gets down on another player for a play that was detrimental. The game always ends with the attitude "we will do better next time."
- The last time I played with my kids, we were so close to winning, but we realized we couldn't play all 25 pieces before the last round ended. I also realized that this outcome is so illustrative of life outside of this game.

- Almost all outcomes by groups working together result in something less than ideal, but still much better than doing nothing at all. Or worse yet, having to live with overly biased outcomes driven by more powerful influencers.
- I shared with my kids that all important societal issues should be addressed and worked out using the lessons from playing Hanabi. The toughest issues should always be addressed in a collaborative environment and never in a competitive environment. They agreed fervently.
- Everyone should understand that they are working with limited information. And that limitation can be overcome if everyone knows and adheres to healthy societal norms for working with one another.
- No one should ever be afraid or embarrassed by someone giving them a clue to something they don't see about themselves.
- Everyone should be willing to listen to all the information being given about an issue. No one should limit their attention or thinking to only their own special interests.
- All Americans should be focused on the best end game for our country, our communities, and families. No one should strive solely for what is best for themselves as individuals.
- In the past, the strength of our country has been our shared values for hard work, fair opportunity to succeed, honest and open dialogue, and effective governance. We have lost the essence of these values.
- If we can recapture a healthy perspective for playing games well together, then I know we can make the necessary changes to live better and govern ourselves better. There are ample opportunities to apply the lessons learned from playing Hanabi to current societal issues.
- I have hope that we can reverse the cultural shift toward the divisive traits of individualism and negativity that keep us from making progress on the important issues of our day.
- I know I am talking to a roomful of like-minded patriots who live from a love for God and country. Let's be that example of love and patience to our fellow citizens that will initiate and enable cultural change. Show and tell everyone around you that positive change is possible if we adopt norms that sustain respect, honesty, and teamwork.
- Let's imagine the fireworks display that we could light up if we work together to return our American culture back to the winning norms that worked for us in the past.

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett