

“Sacking the Exchange!”

A book review of Garry Kasparov's *How Life Imitates Chess* (2007)

April 21, 2009: QCCA Tuesday “10 Rating Points Tonight Tournament” # 7. Round 1. I am 38 years old and tonight was the first time in my life as a tournament chess player that I sacked the exchange.

We all know the basics about the man: born in 1963 in Azerbaijan, childhood pupil of Botvinnik, prodigy, and the youngest world champion after defeating Karpov in 1985; reigning king until his surprising defeat in 2000 and subsequent retirement in 2005.

Garry Kasparov may well have left professional chess for a political career in 2005, yet his analysis of politics, business, and life still emanate from the 64 black and white squares to which he devoted his life. In *How Life Imitates Chess*, Kasparov writes that after his defeat to Kramnik in 2000 he was forced to look at himself and use chess to grow as a person and not merely as a chess player. It is a sentiment that I have told my students for the past decade: “You play who you are”. Chess can then become a lifelong tool for the journey of self-realization. Most of my young pupils have remained unaware of how much I can read about their personalities in the algebraic notations of the rated tournament game we analyze together. It sounds like pop psychology; it is not at all. And now that I read the exact idea in the words of Kasparov I am much more convinced of the validity of such a pursuit to self-awareness.

In chess, unlike many other games, we like to think that all lies open for both players to see. There are no hidden pieces or cards or throw of the dice adding elements of luck or hidden factors. All the pieces and the entire board sit between the two competitors. Yet, all is not open for one to see: the human psychology during and behind every move. That is cleverly hidden within each competitor. Kasparov insists that self-awareness is essential in order to reach peak performance, in your marriage, your profession, in your chess. We cannot choose which style, as a chess player, we would prefer. We can only ask ourselves “what am I lacking?” and “what challenges do I avoid?”. Kasparov demands you emerge into what you do not do well. The “secret” is to actively pursue challenges, not to avoid them.

Why has it taken me three years of playing in tournaments to sack the exchange without seeing any other immediate advantage than the gaining of a pawn and the feeling, the intuition, that the position must be winning? Why do I avoid the challenge of tactical complications when as a young chess player I sought them out? What in my life has become so complacent, so conservative, so planned, and so predictable that I take more joy in the aesthetics of symmetry than the chaos of possibility?

Pablo Picasso is a genius. That is why he said, “Computers are useless. They can only give you the answers.” Humans have to ask the questions. Kasparov believes we must continuously ask “why?” It is our ability to adapt by asking critical questions that is critical to success in the boardroom of a corporation and over the board. You cannot blindly play personal style. You must balance your style with the demands of the positions and your opponent. It is creativity and fantasy that Mikhail Tal taught him and that Kasparov says is at the heart of intuition. And intuition and the ability to use it is the essential element of the competitor in whatever field he chooses.

In a dead draw double rook and one minor piece endgame, I sack my rook for his knight. Now I have rook and bishop vs. two rooks and my opponent has 230 rating points on me. I sack it because the game would have been a draw otherwise and I have had 7 draws in my past two dozen games. I do it because I never do it and because I just have an intuition about it.

Garry Kasparov’s dynamic approach fills the reader with the sense that this man who learned rigorous self discipline from Botvinnik, and who is known for a relentless work ethic attributed only to competitors like Michael Jordan or Jerry Rice, at heart depends on the power of his intuition. His opponents have feared his almost Fritz-like capacity for calculation, and his maniacal preparation and obsessive compulsion to match preparation. Yet, it is his self awareness that he claims has meant the difference between knowing what is a harmless habit and what is a bias that leads to loss of objectivity and to disaster.

The game ends. It is a draw. But I have taken so much from it. I am by nature an aggressor, an attacker. I have been untrue to my nature by playing conservative “just don’t lose” type chess. It felt good to risk the game on an intuition.

When you attack you always have the advantage of the attacker, writes Kasparov. When you risk to find an innovation you reap the rewards of the innovator. Life imitates chess because chess is a controlled microcosm where in a finite and “safe” environment we may explore who we are. The 64 squares within which we can “sack the exchange” risking few rating points and gaining knowledge of self rewards us with the player’s advantage. When you play, you learn about yourself.

For those who want to use chess to see themselves more objectively, I recommend *How Life Imitates Chess*.