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Last updated March 17, 2020 Josh Waitzkin led a full life as a chess master and international martial arts master, and since then he is not yet 35 years old. The Art of Learning: Inner Journey to Optimal Performance tells the story of his journey from chess genius (and the theme of bobby fischer's quest) to the Tai Chi Chuan World Championships with important lessons identified and explained along the way. Marketing expert Seth Godin wrote and said that you should decide to change three things as a result of reading a business book; the reader will find many lessons in Waitzkin's tom. Waitzkin has a list of rules that appear throughout the book, but it's not always clear what exactly the rules are and how they come together. It doesn't really hurt the readability of the book, though, and it's at best a minor inconvenience. There are many lessons for an educator or leader, and as the one who teaches college, he was president of a chess club in middle school, and who started learning martial arts about two years ago. I found books engaging, edifying and insuching. Waitzkin's chess career began among the hustlers of New York's Washington Square, and he learned to focus amid the noise and entertainment it brings. This experience taught him the ins and outs of aggressive chess, as well as the importance of endurance from cagey players with whom he interacted. He was discovered in Washington Square by chess teacher Bruce Pandolfini, who became his first coach and developed him from a great talent into one of the best young players in the world. The book presents Waitzkin's life as a study of contrasts; perhaps this is intentional, given Waitzkin's fascination with eastern philosophy. Among the most useful lessons is the aggression of park chess players and young geniuses who put their queens into action early or who set complex traps and then rushed to the mistakes of opponents. These are great ways to send weaker players quickly, but they don't build strength or skill. He contrasts these approaches with attention to detail, which leads to real mastery in the long run. According to Waitzkin, the unfortunate reality in chess and martial arts - and perhaps in education - is that people learn many superficial and sometimes impressive tricks and techniques without developing a subtle, nuanced command of basic principles. Tricks and traps can impress (or defeat) the gullible, but they are of limited usefulness to someone who really knows what he or she is doing. Strategies that rely on fast mats can wane against players who can reverse attacks and get one in the long middle of the game. Smashing inferior players with four-wheeled mats is superficially rewarding, but it does little to improve your game. He offers one child as an anecdote who has won many games against the worse but who did not want to embrace the real a long string of victories over clearly inferior players (p. 36-37). This reminds me of the advice I have received from a friend: always try to make sure you are the dumbest person in the room to always learn. Many of us, however, draw from the fact that there is a large fish in small ponds. Waitzkin discusses cast chess as an intellectual boxing fight, and they are particularly pertinent given his martial arts discussion 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 had never been in a long fight before. Ali won with his rope-a-dope strategy, patiently absorbing Foreman's punches and waiting for Foreman to run out. His chess lesson is apt (p. 34-36) when he discusses promising young players who focus more intensely on winning fast than developing their games. Waitzkin builds on these stories and contributes to our understanding of learning in Chapter Two by discussing individuals and incremental approaches to learning. Individual theorists believe that things are innate; this way you can play chess or karate or be an economist because you were born to do so. Therefore, failure is deeply personal. In contrast, incremental theorists see losses as opportunities: step by step, gradually, a novice can become a master (p. 30). They rise to the occasion when presented with difficult material, because their approach is oriented towards mastering something over time. Unit theorists fall under pressure. Waitzkin opposes his approach, in which he spent a lot of time dealing with final strategies in which both players had very few elements. On the other hand, he said, many young students start by learning a wide range of opening varieties. This has hurt their game in the long run. (m)all very talented kids are expected to win without much resistance. When the game was a struggle, they were emotionally unprepared. For some of us, pressure becomes a source of paralysis, and errors are the beginning of a downward spiral (p. 60-62). As Waitzkin argues, however, if we are to make the most of our potential, a different approach is needed. The fatal drawback of shock and admiration, blitzkrieg approach to chess, martial arts, and ultimately all that needs to be learned is that everything can be learned through rote. Waitzkin ridicules martial arts practitioners who become collectors of forms with fancy kicks and vortices that have absolutely no fighting value (p. 117). You can say the same thing about sets of problems. It's not about profit fundamentals - Waitzkin has focused on improving some basic principles in Tai Chi (p. 117) - but there's a profound difference between technical proficiency and true understanding. Knowing your movements is one thing, but knowing how to figure out what to do next is a different matter. Waitzkin's intense focus on grounds and processes made him stay strong in the later round, round, opponents withered. His approach to martial arts is summed up in this passage (p. 123): I condensed the mechanics of the body into a strong state, while most of my opponents had a large, elegant and relatively impractical repertoire. The fact is that when there is intense competition, those who are successful have slightly more improved skills than the rest. Rarely is it a mysterious technique that leads us to the top, but rather a deep mastery of what can be a basic set of skills. Depth beats the width of every day of the week as it opens the channel for the intangible, unconscious, creative components of our hidden potential. It's much more than smelling of blood in the water. In Chapter 14, he discusses the mystical illusion, with something so clearly internalized that almost imperceptibly small movements are extremely powerful, as contained in this quote from Wu Yu-hsiang, writing in the 19th century: If the enemy does not move, Then I do not move. With the slightest movement of the enemy, I move first. A science-centered view of intelligence means associating effort with success through teaching and encouragement (p. 32). In other words, genetics and raw talent can only get you that far before hard work has to pick up the slack (p. 37). Another useful lesson concerns the use of adversity (cf. p. 132-33). Waitzkin suggests using the problem in one area to adapt and strengthen other areas. I have a personal example to support this. I will always regret quitting basketball in high school. I remember my sophomore year - my final year of playing - I broke my thumb and instead of focusing on cardiovascular conditioning and other aspects of my game (such as left-handed work), I waited for my recovery 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. He discusses the chunking process, which is compartmentalizing problems for growing problems until he does a complex set of calculations silently, without having to think about it. His technical example of chess is particularly instructive in the footnote on page 143. The chess grandmaster has internalized much about pieces and scenarios; Grandmaster can process much more information with less effort than an expert. Mastery is the process of transforming joints into intuitive. There are many things that will be familiar to people who read such books, such as the need for momentum to set clear goals, the need for relaxation, the technique of entering the zone and so on. Anecdotes beautifully illustrate his points. During the book, he sets out his methodology for getting in the zone, another concept that people in performance-based professions will find useful. It is called a soft zone (chapter three) and consists of being flexible, malleable and able to adapt to circumstances. fighting and and David Allen's Getting Things Done may consider it mind-like water. This contrasts with a hard zone that requires the world of cooperation to function. Like a dry twig, you are fragile, ready to snap under pressure (p. 54). The soft zone is springy, like a flexible blade of grass that can move with hurricane winds and survive hurricane winds (p. 54). Another illustration refers to the creation of sandals if someone is dealing with a journey through a thorny field (p. 55). None of them is based on success on a submissive world or a compulsion to overpower, but on intelligent preparation and nurturing resilience (p. 55). A lot of it here will be familiar to creative people: you're trying to think, but this one song of this one band keeps in your head. Waitzkin's only option was to be in a room with noise (p. 56). In the language of economics, restrictions are given; we have no choice. This is described in more detail in Chapter 16. It discusses the best performers, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and others who are not obsessed with the recent defeat and who know how to relax when they need to (p. 179). The experience of NFL quarterback Jim Harbaugh is also useful as more he could let go of things while the defense was on the field, sharper was in the next drive (p. 179). Waitzkin discusses further things he learned while experimenting with human performance, especially with regard to cardiovascular interval training, which can have a profound impact on the ability to quickly release tension and recover from mental exhaustion (p. 181). It is this last concept — recovery from mental exhaustion — that is probably what most scientists need help in. There is a lot about pushing borders; however, you have to get the right one: as Waitzkin writes, Jackson Pollock can draw like a camera, but instead he decided to spray the paint in a wild way that pulsed with emotion (p. 85). This is another good lesson for scientists, managers and teachers. Waitzken emphasizes special attention to detail when receiving instructions, especially from his Tai Chi instructor William C.C. Chen. Tai Chi is not about offering resistance or strength, but about being able to mix, succumb to, and overcome softness with (p. 103). The book is littered with stories about people who didn't reach their potential because they didn't take advantage of the opportunity to improve or because they didn't want to adapt to the conditions. This lesson is highlighted in Chapter 17, where he discusses making sandals when confronted with a thorny path, such as an insidious competitor. The book offers several principles by which we can become better educators, scientists and managers. The celebration of results should be secondary to the celebration of the processes that produced these results (p. 45-47). There is also a contrast study starting on page 185 it's something that's hard to learn. Waitzkin points to himself he is able to relax between matches while some of his opponents have been pressured to analyze their games between them. This leads to extreme mental fatigue: this tendency of players to exhaustion between rounds of tournaments is surprisingly common and very self-destructive (p. 186). The art of learning has a lot to teach us regardless of our field. I find this particularly important given my chosen profession and my decision to start studying martial arts when I started teaching. The insights are numerous and applicable, and the fact that Waitzkin has used the principles he now teaches to become a world-class competitor in two highly demanding competing companies makes it much easier to read. I recommend this book to anyone who is in a managerial position or in a position that requires intensive learning and adaptation. I mean, I recommend this book to everyone. More on learningFeatured photo credit: Jazmin Quaynor by unsplash.com unsplash.com

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