Ulcer from competition beats over-sweetness

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FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUMENT

Ah, the Christmas season. Invocations of "Good will toward men" wear thin as parking spaces become elusive. Christmas offers a clash between generosity and competition, and Provo writer Donlu Dewitt Thayer worries that the two cannot co-exist.

Writing in the fall issue of Dialogue magazine, Thayer recounts an experience familiar to Christmas shoppers. She found an open space in a crowded parking lot. She was about to pull in, but "A small car ... cut across my path and into the space ... (the driver) grinned and waved a clenched fist while her three children in the back seat cheered."

Thayer honked her horn as she passed the triumphant spot-stealer and "muttered something about drivers in this state deserving everything my Californian roommates ever said about them."

Thayer describes the spot-snatcher's actions — and her own reaction — as products of the "American competitive sickness." Children are marinated in the competitive ethos from the earliest ages. Obedience is encouraged by contests: "At the end of a busy day we stage a race to the bedroom and love best the one who wins."

The problem with a competitive ethos, according to Thayer, is that it conditions children to accept a "false economy of scarcity," to believe that life is an exercise in managing rivalries produced by zero-sum relationships.

There are unfortunate aspects of the competitive mind-set. Most of us can recognize the "Little League Parent Syndrome" (LLPS), in which a parent drives his child to win, often at the expense of sportsmanship. A common thread may connect LLPS, student athlete scandals, steroid use, and non-athletic scandals such as insider trading. All of these things involve a soul-warping desire to win at any price, often by obtaining an illicit edge that will compensate for competitive shortcomings.

But Thayer is mistaken to believe that competition is the product of a perceived economy of scarcity. America's competitive society is explained by this formula: diversity plus freedom equals competition.

Competition — or "faction," as James Madison called it — is the dynamo that drives American society. Madison was convinced that there were but two ways to deal with the factional competition: either remove the cause, or control its effects.

Madison observed, "It could never be more truly said than of the first remedy that it was worse than the disease." This is because "Liberty is to faction what air is to fire." We can dispense with competitiveness only at the cost of suffocating society.

Thayer suggests that "competitive sickness" is a product of a "masculine worldview" which perceives life in terms of rivalries. She recommends the "feminine" worldview as an alternative; this would require the adoption of an "other-regarding" posture. In this way, she suggests, "we help others to change by avoiding creating or participating in battles, races, contests."

Granted, nobody benefits from a petty contest over a parking space; further, it would be splendid if next time they threw a war nobody came. But competition is inevitable in human society — and indispensable for personal and societal development. It is only through the challenge of competition that excellence is manifest, and excellence in any worthwhile endeavor enlarges all of us.

A better prescription for "competitive sickness" is an increased emphasis upon gallantry. It is difficult, but worthwhile, to learn to appreciate the excellence of a victorious rival.

There are, of course, other alternatives to the competitive mind-set. For example, there was the "caucus-race" witnessed by Alice in Wonderland, in which "everybody wins, and all must have prizes" — or, as we would say here in Utah, "everybody is special." Give me a competition-induced ulcer over sweetness-induced nausea anytime.