

RELATIVELY SPEAKING
The Philosophy of Individualism

Number 37

Editor: Gordon F. Brown, PhD

October 2002

GREETINGS!

It was more than a year ago that I drafted an outline of “Relativity and Tiger Woods.” The 9-11 incident took priority then; but now, I would like to share with you this idea describing a unique set of relationships that has given rise to an exceptional golf performance.

The book-writing project progresses. Delaying completion has been due primarily to my experience of generating a more mature idea and then trying to weave it into the current version. To cease this veritably endless version-revision process, I am considering establishing a web site for the purpose of recording subsequent ideas. With the web site in mind, I hope to facilitate the completion of a hard-copy for publication. We shall see!

As for health issues, I am continuing to find that the task of living is significantly more difficult than obliging the duty of dying. Even after surgery and radiation treatments, watching the PSA begin to rise again is not particularly intimidating. Whatever time one has remaining, the seminal task (ha!) is to identify what one chooses to do with one’s life. This goes to philosophy, and I believe relativity has inherent advantages over alternatives. And, relationships are fulfilled moment-by-moment. In contrast, the absolutist is gambling that he has the Right Truth; and the pleasure-seeking mixed will always want more. For the record, I will note that from my experience, relativity seems to be effective only when coupled with a relative theology.

As always, I enjoy and appreciate your “talk back.”

* * * * *

RELATIVITY AND TIGER WOODS

Tiger Woods is today’s quintessential symbol for the game of golf. And, his approach to the game (and perhaps his life) can be seen as a superb example of relativity in action—the product of “interactive relationships.”

For sure, the “Tiger Woods” I am talking about is the Tiger Woods of my experience, and that image is primarily the result of my viewing the usual media coverage of him and his guest appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* about 2 years ago.

The description of Tiger Woods that follows focuses on the **contributions by his parents** regarding (a) *physical endowment*, (b) *social influences*, and (c) *personal choices*. As for the game of golf, it is seen as the medium within which these contributions developed into the phenomenon we call Tiger Woods (“Tiger”).

Tiger’s *physical endowment* is an easy beginning point. A black father and Asian mother provided an interaction drawn from two somewhat different genetic pools to form a combination of unique genetic potential as expressed in his stature, strength, and that million-dollar smile.

Relativity and Tiger Woods—(continued)

Tiger's *social influences* can be seen as uniquely drawn from each parent: from his father, encouragement and direction to develop the discipline for maintaining a sustained, intense focus; from his mother, encouragement to develop the ability for turning inward and finding that comfortable place within where a sense of self confidence and self acceptance are nurtured.

Now we can combine the physical endowment and social influence contributions and note the unique confluence created as these interact within the medium of golf. We can visualize Tiger's initial training as his father directed the physically exhausting and mind numbing experience of learning to hit the ball. This task was not simply swinging at a ball with the mind occasionally wondering off, but an experience so intense that it would lead to an ever-increasing capacity for Tiger to discipline his mind and body for sustained periods of complete focused attention to hit the ball from one point to a pre-established second location. Thank you father!

Before turning to his mother's contribution, providing a context would be helpful. We can note that there is a difference between hitting golf balls at a driving range and hitting a golf ball during an 18-hole tournament. At the driving range, the focus is on the specific act of hitting the ball. This very narrow focus is most commonly useful when initially learning to hit the ball under a variety of conditions or changing a previously learned action. The objective is to keep the eye on the ball and block out all other matters from the mind—a disciplined focus. However, such focused attention on the specific act of hitting a ball can become increasingly counterproductive in tournament play. When hitting a ball during a tournament, the focus is not on hitting the ball while blocking everything else out. Here, the focus is on an image of what you want the ball to do—a mental picture of the ball traveling up into the sky and then falling to the ground at a particular spot and in a particular way.

While the focus is on this dynamic mental picture, it is not to the mental exclusion of all other factors, as it would be on the golf practice range. To the contrary, consider that the tournament golfer learns to passively focus on the mental picture while letting a host of specific factors be automatically accommodated by the mind. The specific factors in golf would certainly include immediate external influences such as wind and terrain, and immediate internal factors such as stamina and motivation. Although not consciously aware of these factors during the swing, they are not blocked out, they are essential input to the brain for achieving the desired effect. This is “no big thing” for the brain. It does basically the same thing when we are walking: lots of specific muscles being coordinated in order to achieve a forward walking motion, and we focus on where we are going rather than the details of the muscular movement. Whether walking or golfing, it becomes problematic if the individual is focusing on the specific parts (as at the driving range) rather than the general mental picture of desired results.

Given this context, we can now turn our attention to the unique and complementary benefit provided to Tiger by his mother—achieving a state of mind where the focus is on the anticipated outcome and the brain is handling all the parts. It can be seen that it was her personality providing Tiger with the encouragement to turn his focus inward. With practice, his mind learned to relax without effort, to automatically connect all those specifically learned strokes and specific internal and external conditions, and to have the experience of connectedness—being in the “zone” as some would put it. Others describe this experience as becoming “one” with the total situation—neither suppressing nor fixating on any specific part, but a passive awareness of the whole. For this sense of connectedness during tournament play, Tiger can say “thank you mother.”

Relativity and Tiger Woods—(continued)

Combining the contributions of both parents aptly illustrates the dynamic interaction of influences that form the essence of relative thought. Given this perspective, we can now turn our attention to looking forward and predicting the challenges in Tiger's future.

Again, providing a context would be helpful. When looking at human experience, there is a common distinction made between three different states. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, they have been termed *body*, *mind*, and *spirit*. Add to this triad the contribution of the 20th Century existentialists, and you have *spirit* described as the experience of "free will" or the act of freely choosing between alternatives. Enough context, let's return to golf and Tiger Woods.

As stated, Tiger's parents provided a physical endowment and social influence providing the basis for Tiger's supreme accomplishment within the medium of golf. As an aside, we can note that given the physical emphasis when learning the golf basics, it follows that the father was the dominate external voice, while the mother provided a background model of strength for developing that quiet internal voice so essential for developing inner strength and integrity. The point is this: In addition to providing the physical and mental states, the parents also provided the spiritual state—in the body-mind-spirit triad. That is, they made the decision for Tiger to focus on the game of golf. Early parent-guided experiences, at the very least, predisposed Woods to continue his commitment to the game—even to the present day.

However, looking forward, we can predict that Tiger will feel an increasing pressure to make his own decisions within that spirit mode—it is just a matter of maturity. For sure, a commitment to golf was important to his father; the task now may be for Tiger to establish or re-establish for himself the importance of golf in his life. The reasons used by his father cannot be the same for him. To restate, it is now up to Tiger to discover or re-discover them for himself. this is *the personal choice* factor. Simply saying that golf is important will not suffice; worse, such empty phrases typically result in a sense of increased personal alienation. Giving to charities or fulfilling some dream state such as "the happy family" or "being a good role model" will predictably become self destructive. As for his golf game, the trivial sense of "wanting to win" or "desiring to improve one's game" can be seen as creating the conditions for mediocrity. It's a common experience: The desire to win is followed by the expectation to win, followed by periods of disappointment, followed by a greater desire to win and ever-increasing disappointment. The heightened expectations initially generate heightened performance but with greater variability. At some point, both fun and performance are diminished.

On the other hand, there is an upside that could occur. Tiger Woods could accomplish what very few people even think of trying to do. He will find something that provides him with his own unique identity and embraces his choices with integrity. At best, golf will become a means or symbolic expression of whatever it is that becomes his chosen sense of identity. Predictably, Tiger may achieve an even more spectacular level of play as he shifts away from his dominate reliance upon his father's contribution of disciplined focus and rely more upon his mother's encouragement for personal, private, and internal integrity.

As a friendly reminder, the above point of view does not represent any real "Tiger Woods" but only my personal impression based on very limited public representations. My purpose is to use a public image (whether real or not) as a common-referent-experience to illustrate how the relative perspective can be used to address challenges facing all of us. We all have the challenge of developing a personal identity as expressed in our choices. In many ways, our task may be easier than that facing Tiger Woods. It may be easier for us to find moments of privacy, which is the only place where one can experience one's self, contemplate change, and give inspirational direction to one's ever-changing identity.

T A L K B A C K

From Kyoko in Los Angeles, CA

Please keep me on y our mailing list. I enjoy every issue.

From Katie in Buena Park, CA

My mindset has been so rigid for so long, it takes an earthshaking event to bring things into perspective.... Your article "Twin Towers" really hit a chord with me...I'm slowly awakening from my "deep sleep" and find myself looking at many thanks in a whole new light. I must admit that I'm what people refer to as a "people-pleaser." However, that has changed. My definition of "important" things has taken on new meaning...my new job...my role in my family...questions about my existence...what I want to get accomplished in this lifetime...what is important to me.... As you so aptly wrote: "...we may find ourselves assessing the importance of our daily activities in terms of their relevance to our basic relationships." Well put!!!...I'm still searching and know it is a lifelong adventure. However, I DO have a choice in the matter. (smile) Hope you have a good day.

From Laszlo in Alhambra, CA

I was happy to receive your most recent newsletter. I found the information contained within it to be thought provoking and profound. I definitely would like to continue receiving the newsletter for as long as you continue doing this great service for your [PCC] students I am currently at the end of a transitional state, some of my strongest personality qualities and opinions have changed drastically over the last few years, and I'm happy with the results. I feel I have grown and evolved a lot and I think that the relative perspective that you helped me start seeing had a lot to do with that...By the way, do you ever [hold those] little meetings anymore? If you do...I would enjoy attending one again.

From Merrick in Manila, CA

Sorry I take so long to respond. Sometimes, I feel like if I write I'd say the wrong thing or waste an opportunity or something...I got letters I started and was going to send. But they were inappropriate to me for some reason or another. Moving away from home has provided a good atmosphere to see myself again and in a new light. I'm the only one I have to answer to at night. Now I can see what I really care about. I enjoy seeing the relationships I have created with friends and projects and stuff, and how they take on a life of their own....

From Anna in Los Angeles, CA

...Wow! What a wonderful newsletter. I haven't enjoyed reading anything about 9-11 until now...I could not put the newsletter down.... I am not a religious person. I do believe in God. I feel that everyone has their own opinion, everyone is entitled to believe or not.

T A L K B A C K—(continued)

From Candis in Los Angeles, CA

Thank you for sending me the latest newsletter...I enjoy reading the newsletters. I hope you are doing well.

From Sarmad in La Crescenta, CA

It's great to hear from you! I was enrolled in your Psychological class at PCC in 1992-1993.... I occasionally will pick up your book and read it. Please continue to send the letters as I continue to be interested.... Thank you!

From Diana in Pasadena, CA

Hello and thanks for your latest newsletter. I thought of you recently and hoped you were doing all right. Thank you for taking the time to keep the relationship going with former students like me (1993). Please keep me on your list. Best wishes.

Interest Updates: Jeremy in Toluca lake, CA; Lily from Salem, OR; Lee from Huntington Beach, CA;
Gail from Murfreesboro, TN.

* * * * *

As a reminder, if you wish to continue receiving the newsletters, remember to update your address and notice of interest at least once every 2 years:

Tel 626-445-1749
email relspeak@earthlink.net
mail School of Communication
 PO Box 1211, Arcadia, CA 91077-1211

* * * * *