

Competition, Cooperation, and the Death of the American Family by Rich Norman

I was raised in a modern American family. My father had learned the lessons necessary to succeed, and taught me the fact: competition. Our family was the distillation of the principle made manifest. Like my mother, my father was a fierce competitor and a serious tennis player. In tennis, the word "love" means but one thing—weakness, and so it was in our family. The rules of the game had always been made perfectly clear, I was to tread the same path as my father, and, was expected to receive no help...none. This was clear. There would be no exceptions. Although my father was a multimillionaire, past my education, he would not provide any assistance in any aspect of my life. I was to leave home at 18. Period. Was I "man enough" to do it alone, to start a business and succeed with no help? I was assured that this lonely victory would be all the sweeter for having accomplished it, alone, but it was not so. After years of constant strain and struggle, the toll was too much, working harder and harder until my health finally failed me, and both my body and my mind were near collapse. I absolutely never requested help under any circumstance, but sick of body and spirit... I called them. My father had a degree in psychology from Stanford, surely he and my mother would help, now that I was so sick. My mental health all but spent, I requested \$20 for a psychiatrist to combat the ever increasing illness. "Would you please help," I asked. How foolish! Whop! 40 love! "Really son? You need money for a shrink? *I am not so impressed with that.* Talk to you later." What did I expect?—To hand the opponent such a thing! Of course I would be beaten down for exposing such weakness! How foolish of me. My mother and father had accomplished much in their lives, and now, have a mountain of my father's money to show for it. When my father died, I bought champagne. I have since become a psychologist.

After I moved to the woods and cut myself off from the competitive world of American society, I met another sort of person, raised in another sort of way. A city dweller all my life, now I found myself amongst an entirely different type of human, with a different ethos: the cooperative. My neighbors are named the Burrs, and they are utterly different than any family I have ever known. When they have troubles, as they have little money, they must *help each other*. How strange! I will repeat: they HELP each other! Isn't that unbelievable? My mom will die secure in the arms of the best medical care money can buy...alone, just as my father did.

Yesterday, the news came, the Burr family patriarch, Alvin Burr, had passed away. Today I went to their property, sat, and looked. I beheld a man's life's work, the field reclaimed with such severe effort, laid flat and right with his own hand, the grass now full and green, spring gently sweeping her last breath over summer's cheek, the hawk gliding, circling, the world turning silently around the tip of a dipped wing, and to know it, to know, that the man who had created all this, was gone... did something to me. Dave Burr, Alvin's son, is my friend. When Dave's son was slacking off, Dave asked me for advice, and I answered him as I was taught to answer, with cruelty and indifference I said, "He is slacking off is he? Kick him out, put him on the street, let him hurt, then he will know." Dave said no, he wouldn't let the boy down that far, he might not be able to get back up. When Dave was mad at his folks, I told him to let them know rather than

pout. "How can you tell, they might care, they might listen, tell them how you feel rather than sit on it, tell them, give them a chance." It worked, and Dave was able to love his dad, even though he had a few rough edges, the old man came through, listened, came through with caring, rather than competition. Now Alvin has passed, and the ashes wait. When his wife, the Burr family matriarch, Shirley, passes, they will both have their ashes scattered up in the mountain I see from their porch, as I sit here and write. My folks had money, and my mom has arranged for a "concierge" to care for her as she dies. Her ashes are also thusly accounted for, although I do not know how. If you are competitive with your children, you had best have money. In that case you will die in comfort. But if you want your ashes scattered upon a mountain, pristine and pure, ringed in cracked ice, as a shawl of lace and light under the blue arch of heaven, you will find that a "concierge" will not take you there. If you are to be loved, first, you must love, and if graced with a hand to hold in death, you might first offer one up in life, for love is not weakness... and if you want your ashes carried, you must yourself, first care and carry.

A "concierge" will clean you and dress you as you age and die, but if you want your ashes carried, and placed near the crest of heaven, you will need more than money to accomplish this thing...you will need cooperation and caring, you will need—family.

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