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Pick Up

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Tony Athos had been on the cover of *Time* magazine as one of the country's best teachers. When I arrived at the Harvard Business School as a doctoral student, he was a senior faculty member. For some reason, he looked kindly on me and took me under his wing. Later as a member of the faculty, teaching a course he designed, I asked him to come watch me teach which he agreed to do. I was up half the night preparing my teaching plan, board plan, contingency plans, key questions, etc. I really wanted to impress him. He sat in the back and I did my thing. After the class, I ran down to his office, salivating like Odie the dog, looking for feedback. I sat down... and he said, "Jim, you're boring." THUNK! An arrow to the heart. My mouth went dry, my palms were sweaty, and I whispered, "Okay, tell me about boring."

"I notice you play basketball with the doctoral students at noon."

"Yes, I love basketball."

"Well, it's obvious. When you come back, your face is lit up, you're grinning from ear to ear, and you're floating down the hall three inches off the floor. You've got to figure out how to play basketball in the classroom."

I remember thinking at that moment, "That's stupid. This is work and basketball is play." I went away depressed and frustrated. And I kept musing on his comment. I thought about more and more. Well, there *is* a tipoff, you have to start somehow. And you pass the "ball" to a student with a question. If the student was prepared, they'd catch it. If not, they'd drop it or it would bounce off their foreheads, BRONG, out of bounds. So, you'd pass to someone else. They might catch it, dribble around for a minute, maybe dribbling too much, and finally pass it to someone else. Every now and then, someone would make an insightful comment, really cutting to the heart of the case or issue, like a reverse slam dunk, people would cheer, and we'd move off "down the court" in another direction. The "ball" was the opportunity to speak, like Native American speaking sticks. When the section worked together, the discussion was a beautiful thing to watch, just like a well orchestrated team, moving the ball quickly and efficiently. Good discussion points, like basketball points, came fast and furious. You *could* play basketball in the classroom.

I began working on that principle in my teaching. I talked less. I coached more. I nodded, I glanced, I raised my eyebrows, and the students began to pick up on these gentle signals and exercise their own heads and energies. The classroom began to come alive for me. It was more and more fun to watch them play rather than trying to control their every movement. When I left HBS, my student ratings had climbed to second in the school. To this day, I attribute much of whatever I might enjoy

about teaching to two main mentors, Tony and Sherwood. And while I didn't know it at the time, Tony had given me a glimpse of a principle I wouldn't really discover until I was 48, some 16 years later.

When I came to the University of Virginia, one of my first goals was to find the local basketball game. They played at Memorial Gym then, but over the years it migrated to the latest, newest of the university's recreation facilities. I met people in that daily 11-1 pm game that have been lifelong friends. Dick, Craig, Gary, Elliott, and a host of others. At the time, Ralph Sampson and the Cavaliers were on a rampage, winning, it turned out, more games in their four years than any other team in NCAA history.

Fifteen years later, I'm still playing in the noon-time game. Get there early or you miss the first one and have to wait. Don't miss your foul shots or you have to sit. Try to hook up with the better players so you don't have to sit. Ten pushups before every game to warm up the triceps. Games to 11 by ones, win by two. The coaches were always strong, several from the football team, the basketball team and the soccer team. Some were very intense, win at any cost kind of guys. Tom O'Brien was always the perfect gentleman. He played hard and was also a gentleman. I had to guard Bruce Arena often as we had similar builds and speed or lack thereof. One day, there was a guy I'd never seen before. I played "2" usually, had a good jumper. I went up against this new guy, and bang! "Spaulding" was tattooed on my forehead. I faked and passed—he stole the ball in mid air. I picked him up at the half court line, he took two steps over, picked up his dribble, looked both ways, elevated and swish, nothing but net. We lost 11-1. Jeez. Who was that guy?

Oh, Dick said, that's Doug Newburg. He played with Sampson. Didn't play much. Went away and came back.

I played on the same court with Doug quite a bit that summer. Then one day, he sidled up and said, "I do more than play basketball. Would you mind if I came to talk with you in your office?" We talked at the Darden School for an hour and Doug told me about his emerging research on world class performance. He'd been interviewing Olympic gold medalists, world record holders, touring musicians, business people, and naval aviators. He'd observed a common pattern in how they approached their lives and told me about what he'd seen. And asked me if I wanted to come to a lecture he was giving in the psych department that night.

I went and sat on the back row. There were maybe 500 students in the lecture hall. Doug began his talk. The word "resonance" came up a lot. About half way through, he asked a question at which I was dumbstruck. NO ONE had ever asked me that question before. Not my mom, not my dad, none of my teachers, none of my supervisors, none of my clients, no one, ever. I couldn't answer it.

How do you want to feel?

I went home that night and couldn't sleep. All my life I'd been taught that what counted was what you *did*. Did you do your homework? Did you clean your plate? Did you mow the lawn? Did you clean your room? What did you get on your report card? Did you go to work? Did you finish your term paper? Did you read the book? Did you get a job? Did you finish your application? Did you get in? Did you get your degree? Did you publish anything this year? Did you teach your courses?

I graduated with Great Distinction from Stanford University. That's Summa Cum Laude in other schools. I'd received my MBA from Brigham Young University and gone to work in San Francisco at Wells Fargo. I rode the commuter train up and down the peninsula, past all the houses made out of ticky tacky. I remember crawling out of my water bed on the floor on my hands and knees to the shower reaching up to turn on the shower to wake up at 5:00 am in order to make the 6:14 am express. I wore suits, I analyzed credits. And I was dying. Every day I felt like they hooked a hose to my abdomen when I went in and sucked out a day's portion of my life's juices.

So, I went back to school. My first week in Cambridge, I slowed down for a yellow light in Harvard Square and some guy in a pickup rammed me from behind, pushed me through the intersection, cursed at me, and flipped me off. I realized I wasn't in Idaho any more. I got my doctorate and was privileged to be invited to join the faculty.

One day at a conference in Los Angeles I got in a little debate with a presenter. Unbeknownst to me the guy sitting next to me was from the Darden Graduate School of Business at the University of Virginia. The next month I got an invitation to visit; I didn't know where Charlottesville was. Tony had spoken highly of the school; I remembered that. During the interviews, they asked me about my family and recreational activities. That was a surprise.

At HBS the message was, "What have you done today?" Not yesterday, today. It was a heady environment. Former Secretaries of Labor and Commerce walking around. World class scholars and teachers. Enormous history. Wonderful colleagues, junior and senior. People who had written the books I was studying. At UVA, they used the case method, so I knew the classroom well. But they asked about my family. When I got back to Boston, one of my colleagues learned that after nine years he had not been granted tenure. That wasn't unusual. 90% of faculty who come, I was told, don't make it. This fellow went home, though, and shot himself. I began to wonder if I was at Harvard to be at Harvard or if I was there to be me. I surveyed my senior colleagues and concluded I'd likely make the associate hurdle but not the full one. So I left my appointment. One of my mentors told me no one had ever done that before, left before being asked to leave. I don't know.

But Charlottesville felt right, so I stayed. And 16 years later, in the gym, I got Spaulding tattooed on my forehead. And the guy asked me a question I couldn't answer.

It took me eighteen months and some forty drafts to answer that question, how do you *want* to feel. It was one of those pivotal events in life that changes one's course. It changed my life. I may be a slow learner. And I'm aware of this: no one had asked that question before I met Doug. I'll pass the ball to him now, and you can meet him, too.