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My Shattered Prediction

“Prediction is indispensable to our lives. Every time we choose a route to work, decide whether to go on a second date, or set money aside for a rainy day, we are making a forecast about how the future will proceed—and how our plans will affect the odds for a favorable outcome” (Silver 14). After reading Nate Silver’s book, *The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail—but Some Don’t*, this statement resonates as an overarching theme. Indeed, Silver’s detailed and insightful analyses of diverse fields, from economics to weather forecasting to poker, have proven how prediction is interwoven in countless phenomena that exist in the world.

Much of Silver’s book describes how prediction is both an art and a science—bolstered by improvements in technology, but reliant upon human ingenuity. Silver highlights that despite progress in the field of prediction, many well-supported forecasts continue to fail. The same holds true in our personal lives; some predictions will succeed while others will fail. The predictions we make vary on our self-determined scale of significance. A few years ago, I made a prediction that ranked high on that scale. Before I can describe this prediction, I must explain the context of my life in which it was rooted.

I have always lived an active lifestyle. I grew up swimming on my local YMCA swim team. At age eight, I did my first kids’ triathlon when my dad stumbled upon a brochure advertising the race. After swimming, biking, and running to the finish line with a smile, I was hooked. For many summers after, I continued to race in kids’ triathlons all over the country. When I was twelve, I was recruited to join a junior elite triathlon team, and my mom began driving me an hour each way to practices. The following year, I began racing in youth elite triathlons (ages 13-15) at the national level. For the first two years that I raced in the youth elite division, I was nationally ranked in the top five.

At age fifteen, my final year in the youth elite division, my training had never been better—my times in the pool and on the track were getting faster. At each of the races leading up to the National Championships, I was placing better against the same competition. I was further developing my “mental toolbox” that Silver describes in the chapter about baseball, exhibiting key elements like preparedness, concentration, self-confidence, and adaptiveness (97-98). The data was there. I could hear the signal, and so could my coach, teammates, and parents. By the time the final race arrived, I had made a silent prediction: I was going to win Nationals.

The race started out perfectly. After exiting the swim portion in prime position and surging towards the front on the bike, my prediction seemed closer to reality than ever.

However, my fortune took a turn for the worse. When the girl riding her bike in front of me slid out on the rain-slicked pavement during a U-turn, I crashed inevitably. In tears, I pulled myself up and fixed my bike while dozens of girls passed me. My prediction had become impossible to fulfill. Despite the devastation, I mounted my bike with a vengeance, passing as many people as possible on the remainder of the bike and run. I finished in fifth place with bloody elbows and knees.

The race left me bitter. I couldn't fathom that, despite the evident signals, my prediction had crumbled. In Chapter 4, Silver touches on the longstanding debate between predestination and free will: do we determine our own destinies? or are they already written for us? (112). This sure seemed like a case of the latter; I had prepared to the best of my abilities and executed the beginning of the race as planned, only to be thwarted by factors out of my hands.

Silver warns that errors in prediction often arise from failure to acknowledge uncertainty in the world (308). While I had not necessarily been overconfident (another predictive vice he cautions against), the race served as a blunt reminder that I couldn't predict everything with certainty. Silver states, "One sign that you have made a good forecast is that you are equally at peace with however things turn out—not all of which is within your immediate control" (130). After talking with my coach, I reflected. My day did not go as presumed, but I was able to adapt to the circumstances, adjust my mindset, and persevere. I had still finished 5th out of 75 of the best girls in the country after a bike crash—I had to be proud.

In describing poker, Silver asserts that a solution to failed prediction is to focus more on the process instead of just the results (327). In my own case, there was certainly value in the process. I had proven my courage in a meaningful way, by getting back up after being knocked down. At my team banquet, my coach recognized me as an exemplar of determination, and the following year, he selected me to be a mentor for one of the younger girls new to the team. As Silver points out in one of my favorite lines of the book, "And yet complex processes produce order and beauty when you zoom out and look at them from enough distance" (173). Yes, my prediction had been shattered. But more importantly, I was able to take those shards and assemble them into a mosaic more beautiful than I could have imagined.

In the end, improving our predictions is directly related to learning more about ourselves and the world around us. As Silver so expertly states in his conclusion, "Distinguishing the signal from the noise requires both scientific knowledge and self-knowledge: the serenity to accept the things we cannot predict, the courage to predict the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference" (453).