

Book Review

The Secret Between Us, Competition Among Women, by Laura Tracy, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, & Co., 1991, 261 pages, \$19.95.

Even after receiving a Ph.D. in sport psychology, several years experience coaching girl's and women's tennis, a faculty teaching position at a women's college, competitive experience in swimming, riding, and tennis, and growing up female, I have never really understood the emotionality attached to women in competition. I have seen and experienced jealousy and envy among girls and women in sport situations that I never saw when coaching men. As a coach and competitor, I have ridden the emotional roller coaster called women's sports. I have always wondered why other women in sports would be jealous of me and try so hard to compete with me, when I clearly felt that I was doing what was right—trying my hardest mentally and physically, minding my own business, and playing by the rules. As a women's tennis coach, I never really understood why challenge matches (whose purpose was to produce the highest quality team) often turned into “bloody battles.” The challenge matches brought much more of the worst out of the players than matches against other collegiate teams. While I had been developing some theories and looking for answers to some of my questions I found this book. Laura Tracy answered many of my personal and professional questions in her provocative book.

Tracy begins her eye-opening work with the premise that women deny their competitiveness and in doing so cripple their own growth and identity development. Through interviews with many women, Tracy found that most of the women she interviewed denied competing with other women. “They seemed ashamed of acknowledging female competition, and inevitably, as they talked, they told stories, one after the other, about other women competing with them—stories filled with treachery,

duplicity, malice, and flat-out craziness” (p. 4). Tracy goes on to talk about the socialization process and the feminine ideals that hold that true competition between women is unethical and even immoral. She shows how those beliefs cause women to become subordinate members of society.

Tracy suggests “Then real secret in our society is that the competition between women is the tie that binds us most closely together” (p. 7). She further argues that by keeping competition a secret, and competing only in private lives along personal lines, significantly distorts our lives. Women feel despair when they deny that they compete. It causes women to fear other women and causes them to feel shame in themselves. Since women have been encouraged to define themselves in relation to each other, competition, which divides and sets up hierarchies, causes women to go against the societal beliefs and norms.

Throughout the book, Tracy explains how competition can challenge women and strengthen their identity. One of the keys that she suggests is learning to compete without anger and accept the separation caused by competition and achievement, even though the separation does not strengthen relationship ties between women. Women can learn to strengthen their ties to other women through competition by learning to value shared interests in competitive endeavors, rather than focusing on the separation that winning creates. This is very difficult, as Tracy acknowledges when she says:

When women compete with each other, we are trying to differentiate ourselves. But since knowing we are different from other women frightens us and makes us feel that we will be abandoned and alone, most of us have learned to disguise our competitiveness. Instead, we feel envy. We feel envious of the women with whom we compete, far more consistently than men envy the other men they come up against (p. 14).

Changing these beliefs allows women to create more choices for their lives, whereas adherence to these beliefs—that denying competitiveness allows women to feel bonded and intimate—causes women to deny their unique identity and not create lives designed to fulfill their own potential.