The Mathers
The Role of Competitive Partnership
in the Evolution of the Puritan Ethic
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Richard Mather's Congregational Puritan parish was founded in 1636 in Dorchester, Massachusetts, Yale College in 1701, The Connecticut Land Company in 1791, Pickands Mather and Co. in 1883, the nation's first United Way campaign, the Cleveland War Chest (later Community Chest), in 1917 and the Cleveland Clinic in 1919. After World War II a major federally funded effort to unlock the secrets of fusion power was begun under the aegis of the Atomic Energy Commission headquartered in Washington, DC. On the surface these seven undertakings may appear to have little in common beyond the obvious — namely that they represent beginnings of institutions that were to play an important role in the development of the United States.

What is less obvious is the influential role that the Mather family played in the founding of each of these institutions, how the founding and subsequent development of each of these institutions contributed to the Mathers' overriding Puritan ethic, and how each of them contributed to the development of "competitive partnerships" that enhanced that realization of the Mathers' core Puritan ethic.

The Mather family of New England and Ohio has embarked on many other religious, civic and business creations in the 360 years and 13 generations since Richard Mather, dispossessed of his English pulpit, arrived to take up his puritan ministerial calling in the six year old Massachusetts Bay Colony. But this paper is designed to initiate a preliminary exploration of how "competitive partnership" developed as an enduring and powerful element of the Puritan ethic that has driven the Mathers for 360 years and 13 generations from the early seventeenth century to the present. Therefore, these seven undertakings are only a representative listing of some of the competitive partnerships in which the Mathers had a major role. A full listing would be too long, since the concept pervaded every aspect of their life: religion, family, politics, the arts, civic affairs, medicine, science and industry. They are chosen because their beginnings are spread out over the whole 360 years, and the institutions survive to this day; they are of national, not just regional importance; and they encompass both pieces of what the original puritans found to be an artificial distinction between the proper goals of the "profit" and "non-profit" world.

The scope of the paper and my current state of knowledge also preclude a full examination of the ebb, flow and evolution of each of these examples. I will deal more fully with the first two examples which deal with the core puritan institution of church and school and touch on the other five examples in only the sketchiest form, leaving further elaboration to the question and answer session and to future presentation. In so doing I hope to question our current adherence to "political correctness" that in the interest of avoiding conflicts of interest deters the cross fertilization that is one of the keys to the benefits of "competitive partnership". I submit that the evolution and survival of these institutions in part through the mechanism of competitive partnership suggests the potential power and value of the concept as an important element of today's living puritan ethic. And I question whether these competitive partnerships would have come about without the sometimes conflicted leadership of people like the Mathers, people who derive their fulfillment by pursuing a "high" altruistic calling across organizational lines, people who join the religious and the secular, the philanthropic and the profit sectors into an integrated, unified whole.

What do I specifically mean when I speak of "competitive partnership" as the Mathers lived it within the Puritan Ethic? First, it is important to recall that a fundamental tenet of puritanism is the striving by the "elect" to create God's pure vision on this Earth by passionately pursuing one's "calling". It follows to the puritan that all aspects of life — religious, artistic, business, government and civic — are to be parts of an integrated whole, not independent causes. Partners are to be chosen with care to make sure that their calling and skills meet the needs of a task. God's pure vision is only to be met through energetic teamwork. But teamwork, i.e. partnership, by itself is not enough. However great the efficiencies of integration, scale and specialization, mankind tends to grow static and complacent without the creativity and impetus for improvement fostered by spirited competition.

Certain elements of a competitive partnership stand out across all of these examples and are as valid today as they were in 1636:
• The scale of working units within an organization must be small enough to allow strong personal identification with the success or failure of the unit and the organization.

• The resources of the organization must be large enough and skilled enough to allow operational economies of scale and to provide critical mass to enable development, production and sale of a competitive, constantly improving product or service.

• The management and work force of an organization must be chosen based not just by competence and intelligence, but most importantly by the passion and energy that the person brings to the task at hand.

• A mechanism or cooperative structure is needed to provide cross fertilization between competing organizations and to prevent destructive competition that could otherwise waste resources and ultimately lead to predatory and static monopoly.

• The organization must have an ethos that puts human development in the sense of striving to meet a high calling as a central focal point.

With these requirements in mind, let’s take a brief look at our seven examples.

In 1637 Richard Mather, after only one year’s residency in the six year old Massachusetts Bay Colony, ended a year of indecision and self examination by committing himself to joining the brotherhood of Puritan New England ministry. With the encouragement and approval of his six fellow “devines” and beholden only to the governance of his congregation, he brought together at Dorchester, one of the seven original villages of the Bay Colony, a new congregation organized under the already agreed upon ground rules of non-separatist congregational Puritanism.

Non-separatist Congregational Puritanism was unique in 1636 in that while nominally a part of the Anglican Church it paid no allegiance to the Anglican hierarchy of bishops; each congregation was independent and legally empowered to choose its minister and its interpretation of doctrine, all under the charter granted to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Nominally the church bowed to the body politic, the governor and the Bay Colony Court (a council) on secular matters. But the common adherence of the first generation of settlers to non-conformist puritan principles meant that in practice the Bay Colony was a theocracy where devines like John Cotton, Richard Mather, Thomas Shepard, John Davenport, Thomas Hooker and a small group of other pastors through sermons and advice lead the community from a philanthropic, secular, educational, political and business standpoint, as well as in matters religious. For example Richard's son, Increase, served as the non-resident president of Harvard for 16 years at the same time he was pastor of the Old North Church and de facto ambassador of the Bay Colony to the Court of King Charles II and James II in England over the negotiations to get the revoked charter reinstated. In the business sector the devines set the acceptable level of profitability and woe betide anyone who exceeded it as Boston tradesman Robert Keayne found out in 1639 when he only avoided excommunication and loss of coveted church membership by “penentential acknowledgment” of his sin of excessive profiteering.

But how did Richard Mather, his son, Increase, and his grandson, Cotton, together with Richard's other five sons and their progeny contribute to the creation of the Congregational Church and later an ecumenical consortium of Presbyterian, Episcopal and other Protestant sects that operated as an effective “competitive partnership” in both the religious and secular spheres.

Most important, given the autocratic, monopolistic nature of both the religious and secular world of 1636, was the unique opportunity that the Bay Colony charter gave the émigrés to organize themselves under the puritan precepts that were common to all of them. The Puritan reaction against the corruption and static monopoly of the hierarchical and autocratic Anglican (and Roman Catholic) churches was of such intensity to cause the Bay Colony to assure congregational independence from a stifling hierarchy. This congregational independence met our first test of “competitive partnership”, i.e. working units small enough to allow personal identification. That this happened 140 years before Adam Smith published “Wealth of Nations” setting out for all the advantages of free trade, competition and self-seeking profiteering in a non-monopolistic setting is a testament to the unique combination of factors that coalesced under the leadership of the Bay Colony devines.

Unlike the Pilgrim settlement at Plymouth that preceded the Bay Colony by ten years, the Bay Colony expedition brought with them adequate leaders, settlers, money and goods to survive and prosper. The initial emigration in 1630 involved 14 ships to the Pilgrims one. It was inspired by the puritan minister of
Dorchester in England, John White. It was adequately financed and led on site by the likes of the wealthy Saltonstalls, Leverettts, Johnsons, Dudleyes, Bradstreetes, Pynchons, Downings and Winthrops, a group of puritan friends centered around the Earl of Lincoln. It included so many Trinity College Cambridge educated Puritans that the Colony was said to be the most educated geographic entity in the world. Moreover, by the time Brazenose College Oxford educated Richard Mather arrived in 1636, having been relieved of his pulpit by Bishop Laud, he was in the company of thousands of additional émigrés of Puritan persuasion all driven from England for similar reasons. The Colony clearly had brought with it adequate resources to meet the second requirement of a “competitive partnership.”

The required passion and energy for a competitive partnership were also at hand, driven by the ideological basis for the emigration. Likewise, the fifth requirement, an ethos emphasizing personal development through achieving a “high” calling was inherent in the basic Puritan ethic.

The cross fertilization between towns and congregations bears further comment because it happened through informal channels outside of the clear strictures of the Charter. The devines of the various churches of the original seven towns of the Bay Colony ( Roxbury, Dorchester, Charlestown, Lynn (Saugus), Medford, Cambridge (Newtown) and Boston) met informally from time to time as well as formally in non-binding synods to develop positions for example on how to handle second generation membership in the church. On this pivotal issue Richard Mather, by then a major leader in the church as well as being married to John Cotton’s widow, formulated “the half way covenant”; his son, Increase, for a time took a more conservative position, but in the end espoused his father’s more liberal leanings. In brief the devines ruled through the power of persuasion to the political and economic leaders of the community with church membership a critical carrot to maintain the right to vote.

The influx of settlers from pre-Cromwellian England, the dominant personalities of many of the early devines, an inability to agree on doctrinal matters, and a quick exhaustion of the fur supply in the vicinity of Boston quickly resulted in a proliferation of settlements, all exercising their congregational independence. For example in 1634-1635 Thomas Hooker decamped with his congregation from Newtown to the Connecticut River near Hartford, in 1637 William Pynchon began a village at Agwam (Springfield) while in 1638 John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton founded the separate colony of NewHaven.

These early New England villages, governed under a town meeting structure where church membership was required for the vote, independent of higher authority, influenced and bound together by common beliefs which were interpreted and evolved under the guidance of the devines, prospered spiritually and materially as an early example of competitive partnership.

In later years the basic Puritan ethic and emphasis on competitive partnership never left the Mather family, but its religious manifestation became more dispersed and ecumenical as the country’s size and diversity grew. For example, during the nineteenth century Digby Baltzell counted 28 direct Mather descendants in the male line and 52 in the female line holding pulpits in the northeast and Midwest. Several additional Mathers were active as college presidents or professors, a closely affiliated religious activity up until the early years of the twentieth century. And the example set by Timothy, the only son of Richard, a Dorchester farmer who disappointed his kinsman by not becoming a minister, established a secular puritan alternative for the family that would be followed later by many of his line in Connecticut and Ohio.

In Cleveland, for example, from the late 1800s until his death Samuel Mather was actively involved as senior warden of Trinity Cathedral in Cleveland as well as in supporting the national Episcopalian effort as a board member of the church’s lay governing body. At the same time his wife, Flora Stone Mather, was a dedicated lay leader of the Presbyterian Old Stone Church thereby creating a competitive partnership right within the family. Their ecumenical religious interests formed the driving force behind all of their other activities in both the non-profit and profit sphere.

Our second example of a puritan based competitive partnership induced by the Mathers begins 65 years after Richard’s arrival in Dorchester. In 1701, Richard’s son, Increase’s 16-year tenure as part time, non-resident president of Harvard College came to an abrupt and unwanted end when Increase’s conservative vision for Harvard was liberalized to include Baptist and Anglican participation on the Board of Overseers with consequent academic ramifications. Increase and his son, Cotton, responded by recommending the realization of the 65 year old dream of John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton to establish a rival “collegiate school” in New Haven. Before year-end, this new college, renamed Yale at Cotton’s suggestion in 1718, was in business to carry out Harvard’s original Congregational Puritan mission. The dynamic cooperative, yet competitive relationship that evolved over the years between liberalized Harvard,