

MARCH MADNESS

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I, too, believe in the Church of Baseball. From the precise diamond patterns mown into the outfield grass to the lukewarm hot dogs, there is something magical about being present for a baseball game.

Of course, I also believe in the Congregation of Hockey, the Fellowships of the Winter and Summer Olympics, and, of course, the Religious Society of Basketball, whose most holy shrine (as far as I'm concerned) is one Cameron Indoor Stadium, home to the Duke Blue Devils. Your opinion might vary.

So today I thought we'd take a look at spirituality and sports.

Now, some might argue that sports are a distraction from more meaningful forms of interaction. Others say that the emphasis on competition—to the point where athletes seek unfair advantages to get ahead—is **spiritually harmful**. (Lawrence, Ian, "The Emergency of Sport and Spirituality in Popular Culture", <http://www.thesportjournal.org/article/emergence-sport-and-spirituality-popular-culture>)

I can't say I disagree entirely with these things. It does seem sometimes that in a world with so many problems, taking time to play sports is frivolous—and that goes even more so for watching them (after all, those who play are at least getting some exercise). And yet, there has to be room in our lives for things that are not so gosh darn *serious*, right?

For me, one of those things is sports. And what better time to engage in a look at sports and spirituality than during March Madness—the annual NCAA basketball tournaments, on the eve of opening day at Yankee Stadium, and so close to April Fool's Day, when, it has been explained to me, many here expect your minister to dress strangely.

One of the potential spiritual lessons of sports comes in its ability to connect people—to each other as well as to a team of strangers.

Not too long ago, I was in a workshop in which we were discussing "peak experiences," those mystical, transcendent experiences of what Abraham Maslow would call "self-actualization." During peak experiences, it is said one finds connectedness with the universe around us—sometimes one is overwhelmed with that sense of being part and parcel of a vast and wondrous creation.

Many of my colleagues described experiences like sitting on mountain ridges at sunset, or finding deep inner peace on a meditation retreat. I thought of women's basketball.

Needless to say, I kept my mouth shut... perhaps I should have shared this sooner!

The date was March 22, 1999, the place: the Greensboro Coliseum in North Carolina. Duke faced Tennessee, who had won three national championships in a row and were, by all accounts, headed for their fourth.

I sat in the Duke section, a tiny sliver of blue in a sea of Tennessee orange. And yet, somehow, our little group managed to pull together and make more noise than the Lady Vols fans—a disparity that grew as the Blue Devils took and held the lead. Needless to say, Duke won that game, and we left elated, but what stays in my memory is the experience of connection—with the other fans as well as with the Duke players.

We could tell that our cheering helped the players on the team reach for that extra something they needed to beat the best team in the country—and again and again, they rose to the challenge, making us cheer even louder. It was a cycle of connection that brought me, at least, to a different level of being.

It's hard to explain if you don't care about basketball. If that's the case for you, I'm sorry—think about sitting on a mountain or meditating in retreat if you have to.

I remember my first Yankee game so vividly that I was able to find the date and the box score on the internet. I remember the hot dogs and the bright lights and the green grass of the field. I remember specific plays, and, of course the opponent and the score. The funny part is that I remember the game but not that it was the day after my birthday.

Not all of these peak memories involving sports even involved going to games. While the breeze blowing in from centerfield or Fourth of July fireworks over a stadium are magical things, I've had memorable sports experiences far from a ballpark or coliseum as well—moments that, despite thousands of miles of distance, connected me with others whose attention was focused in the same way mine was.

I'm sure I'm not alone.

I remember where I was in 1988 when Brian Boitano won the gold medal in figure skating at the Olympics in Calgary (babysitting for the Benson kids who lived down the street from us in Armonk).

I remember where I was in 1994 when the Rangers won their only Stanley Cup in my lifetime (on the couch in my living room in Durham with my housemates).

And on October 26, 1996, when the Yankees beat the Braves in Game 6 of the World Series, I was eating Mexican food at a restaurant on the end of the Santa Monica Pier. In those days before cell phones, I found a pay phone and a calling card to call home in celebration (and to call my Braves fan friend Brian, who later had to wash my car wearing my neon pink Yankee cap).

One of the spiritual gifts of sports is its ability to bring people together.

Of course, it's not just spectators and fans who are bonded by sports. As much as being a Cameron Crazy might forever be part of my identity, those who play team sports experience that level of connection as well.

And those who love those who play sports, as any parent of a child involved in sports activities knows, get involved in the connection as well.

Freelance writer Billy Fondren, in reflecting on his own memories of sports, writes, “Obviously, sports can be about bonding, a very spiritual component of life. And this also applies to the little leagues. I remember when I first began playing soccer in the third grade. My family would come to my games and cheer their lungs out. Then came the traveling teams starting in seventh grade. Every so often, we piled into the car for a trip to some out of town soccer tournament. I made some great friends on those teams, and my family came together in ways that we may not have otherwise done so” (Billy Fondren, “Reflection: The Spirituality of Sports,” http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/reflections/ref_20021009.shtml)

Sports can give us the gift of connection.

Another spiritual gift from sports is a more holistic look at life. Too often in our culture, we are asked to separate the physical, the mental and the spiritual—as if our bodies and consciousness could be artificially split into pieces.

The connection between body and spirit in sports is strong. The grace, strength, and endurance that athletes exhibit on a regular basis—sometimes seemingly without effort—remind us that our bodies, whatever shape they are in, are beautiful and wondrous creations.

And while few people will have the ability to hit a 90 mile-per-hour fastball out of Shea Stadium, to run a four-minute mile, to land a triple axel, or to hit a game-winning three point shot at the buzzer while being guarded by two six-foot-something people, all of us have the ability to create grace and beauty in the physical world that transcends mere physicality.

This connection has been known for millennia, and was especially important to the ancient Greeks.

Olympic rower Dr. Susan Saint Sing discusses the ancient Greek concept of *arete* (ahr-ah-TEE) in her book *Spirituality of Sport*.

“Arete in its basic sense means ‘goodness,’ ‘excellence’ or ‘virtue’ of any kind. In its earliest appearance in Greek this notion of excellence was bound up with the notion of the fulfillment of purpose or function; the act of living up to one’s full potential.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arête>)

Saint Sing goes deeper, describing it as necessarily asking people to balance body, mind and spirit in the quest of virtue. She says, “It is a very ancient concept of grace and beauty in strength. I think this quality is lost sometimes in sport in our headlong pursuit of winning, or money. If one pursues excellence – arete - then you win more than just a medal.” (Interview with Susan Saint Sing by Lisa Hendey, <http://www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=2139>)

Saint Sing goes on to say that to her, “sport is an extension of the beauty of creation.” (Interview with Susan Saint Sing by Lisa Hendey, <http://www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=2139>)

The spiritual practice of “centering” is an ancient one. Many do this with prayer or meditation, many with deep contemplation of what is at the core. But some know this practice as one deeply rooted in the body as much as in the mind and spirit.

Buddhist masters, in teaching people how to meditate, first ask us to focus on our breath. When I breathe in, I breathe in peace. In focusing on drawing air into the center of our body, we are put in the present moment.

Any person who has ever thrown a piece of clay on a potter's wheel knows the connection of centering to the body. As does anyone who has ever tried to spin while perched on thin blades on ice. The best figure skaters in the world enter spins with such an awareness of their center of gravity that they spin in place, not moving across the ice at all. It is a marvelous sight to behold.

Sports remind us that our bodies are wondrous creations, and that we have the ability to integrate our physical, mental and spiritual selves, to create works of grace and beauty, and to find our deepest center.

Sports also teach us important lessons about failure.

An excellent hitter in baseball gets between three and four hits every ten times he comes up to bat. Turned the other way, that means two-thirds of the time, that player faces failure at the plate.

Athletes whose skill is unparalleled fall short on a regular basis. Michelle Kwan is arguably the best figure skater of our time—with nine U.S. and five world titles to her credit—and yet on the biggest stage of them all, the Olympics, she failed to win—twice. And each time, she stood proud as she received her medal—silver in 1998, bronze in 2002.

Teams marked as “destined for greatness” fall short. Even the greatest teams generally lose sometimes—even if they can manage to be perfect for one season.

I will admit that I would have rooted for any team playing the New England Patriots in this year's Super Bowl—and not because I hate New England that much (though, well...), but rather because I cringed at the thought of a team having that “perfect” a season. I sure was glad it was the Giants that stopped them, though.

And for all of those wonderful moments I remember watching, I remember the failures, too. In 2006, the Duke women's basketball team was heavily favored to finally win a national championship. They lost the final game, in overtime, to arch-nemesis Maryland. I could hardly watch the game, and yet I knew that the team I was pulling for, despite being national runners-up, were still an amazing group of athletes who deserved my respect for their accomplishments.

And those athletes learn to play another day. They feel the disappointment, they feel the pain, and the best ones channel it into improving, into renewed passion, into *arete*.

Sometimes, championship teams look back at their season and understand that they needed to lose a bunch of times in order to get better, to learn, to grow, and to win in the end. Would that any of us have the perseverance to channel our losses and failures into opportunities for growth.

Would that any of us, faced with failure on a national or international stage, would have the grace and dignity to hold our heads up high.

Would that any of us could be proud of reaching our goal thirty percent of the time—knowing that the other seventy percent of the time, we gave it our best shot.

Finally, sports can teach us how to have fun. And the business of fun—of play, of laughter, of lightness—is important spiritual stuff. Just ask any of the resident clowns around here.

Jesuit scholar Hugo Rahner is quoted as having written: “To play is to yield oneself to a kind of magic ... to enter a world where different laws apply, to be relieved of all the weights that bear it down, to be free, kingly, unfettered and divine” (Lawrence, Ian, “The Emergence of Sport and Spirituality in Popular Culture”, <http://www.thesportjournal.org/article/emergence-sport-and-spirituality-popular-culture>)

Too often, in “growing up,” our society forces us to lose our inclinations to just let loose, our innate sense of fun, our ability to yield to the magic that is play. Too often, our society asks our children to let go of these things long before they should.

And so, today, in the middle of March Madness, on the eve of Yankee Stadium Opening Day, and just a little bit before April Fools’ Day, let us remember what it means to have fun.

Let us strive to make this a place where serious things are taken seriously, but where there is ample time for setting them aside as well. Where there is ample time to play.

In the prayer I offered us earlier, Richard Trudeau implored us to make this a place where the rules are different from outside of here. One of the rules that I’m glad we can dispense with from time to time is that the stuff of religion doesn’t always have to be so *serious*.

We can and should have some fun. We can and should enjoy what we do together. We can and should reclaim the divine magic of play together, and sports can serve as a vehicle or a metaphor—whichever we need more—in that journey.

It is telling that almost a year ago, I got the chance to bond with many of you while playing softball. At our softball game and picnic, I wore the cap from the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship’s softball team. Some of you might remember that when you called me to serve as your minister, you gave me another cap to wear, one with the logo of this Fellowship on it, and you asked me to join your team. I enthusiastically accepted being your number one draft pick.

I’ve since worn this cap with pride—most notably throughout my trip to Alaska last May. Eric and I finally had those pictures printed this past week, and there I am, standing in front of glaciers and mountain vistas wearing a baseball cap that says “UUFNW” on it.

This cap is a symbol that we’re on the same team. We have been since you voted to call me and gave it to me as a present. It is a symbol taken from the world of sports into our world of religion.

I’m glad I get to play for this team, in this place of myth and memory where the connections are strong, where we all can grow and change together, where we can take risks and fail on a regular basis, where we can be whole people—body, mind and spirit—and, most of all where we can have some fun. Blessed be.