

Meditation (by Dave Hudson)

When I entered the ninth grade at the Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut, at the age of thirteen, a very small 4' 8" and 80 pounds, I joined the cross country team. All Taft students were required to participate in some sort of athletic endeavor - fall, winter, and spring. I was too small for football; I had never kicked a soccer ball, but I had met some runners, whom I liked. So I joined the team. I had no special running talent. But I threw myself into it, as was my nature, worked hard, often to the point of complete exhaustion, and achieved some moderate success. I admired the good ones – the upperclassmen with the long, sinewy bodies, powerful legs, runner's builds – and I thought of them as other. I would be like them, but I had no expectation of ever being in their league, those who looked like Greek gods to me.

But I had a wonderful coach, an inspirational man, who taught me that in my perceived weakness there was a strength that I had not imagined – and he taught me to find it. He led me to realize that I could use my size to advantage on the cross-country course – our course, in particular, a very hilly one. He suggested that I charge the hills, passing as many people as possible on my way up, knowing that with my short legs and light weight I could do that easier than the bigger guys. If I could hang on to my place on the flats and the downhills, then what I had gained on the uphills would make the difference. My success in the dreaded hill climb practice drills, in which we would sprint full speed up a steep hill a dozen times in succession, resting only on the jog back down to the bottom had given me some confidence, so I tried the strategy.

It worked. I was still not the fastest runner on the course, but I had found a way to succeed – to flourish – using my native attributes – without having to become someone else. I won only one race in my cross-country career, and the race which best illustrates the point was not that one. I remember it well. Near the end of the season of my senior year, we ran against a strong, undefeated team on their difficult, hilly course. The prospects for victory were not bright, for, as the coach wrote in the yearbook, “we lacked the kind of dynamic front runner our team had had almost every previous year.” Nonetheless, I was game. Encouraged by victory against a weaker team on our home course the week before, I went out with the leader, a big, strong, talented runner – one of the best in New England that year, staying right on his heels. On the first uphill I passed him, only to have him hang right behind me and pass me on the next downhill. However, I doggedly kept up the pattern, passing him on each hill, until, on the last long climb he failed to stay with me. I had demoralized him; short legs and lightness had beaten size and muscle. The last hundred yards was downhill, unfortunately, and, as I reached for the finish – spent - another of our opponents nipped me at the line. I was disappointed but not devastated; I had had my personal victory; my learning was confirmed. I had prevailed, succeeded, just as I was.

To be weak, to have weakness, is fundamental to the human experience. We are all weak in one way or another. We despair of our weaknesses, and we would have them disappear. We envy those whom we see as strong, and we wish to be like them. We are often crippled by our weakness, unable to fulfill our potential because we have resigned ourselves to defeat. We intimidate ourselves. We wallow in our ineptitude. Or we try to change ourselves, to fix ourselves, to eliminate the deficiency – to become someone else.

But also fundamental to the human condition are great sources of strength. Strength is not reserved for the hero or the superstar. It resides within all of us, often unseen – disguised as weakness – until it is revealed by a fresh perspective. When, in the wash of a new light, we see strength in our weakness and make peace with the person those characteristics represent, only then are we free to grow into rich, full lives.

Sermon:

“It is a religion,” she said. And I knew what she meant. Though, never in all my training to become a religious professional had I done any of the things she spoke of – and knew of no church requiring it – I could scarcely think of any better way of learning religious truth. I could tell what she had done – relentlessly daily hours of practice since she was six years old that gave her the intensity and clarity of focus usually only found among monks.

“It’s a religion” she said. Though her claim was not made in any conventional sense. She admitted to having only rarely been inside any actual church – and then not being too comfortable with what she found there. She had never given a formal sermon; been charged to care for a community of people; and I knew she could not recite a bible verse to save her life. But even so, I knew there was nothing I could tell her about religion that she did not already know. The terminology may be unfamiliar. But she understood the truth at religion’s core. Like it was in her bones. She said it was religion. And I knew what she meant.

She had robes. But they were terrycloth. And she had a church. But it was filled with water. Megan Neyer found religion by learning how to jump off a ten meter platform into a pool. Sometimes when it was 45 degrees with 20 mile an hour winds. Sometimes in front of judges. And fans. On TV. Always in a skimpy little suit. And she did it until she was good enough to forget that she was scared out of her mind. Until she was good enough to win 15 national championships. Until she was good enough to go to the Olympics. She said what she did was religion. And I knew what she meant.

Some people would say that everything about sports is hype – that it’s just a game. That there’s little purpose in it. That aside from the rules, the intrigue of strategy and the suspense of possibly seeing someone crash or hit the wall... that, in the end, all it really comes down to is a crude declaration of winners and losers. The upheld and the upended. Some have said that it is like a drug to divert our attention from the serious matters of life.

But they have said the same thing about religion. That there’s little purpose in it. Aside from the rituals, the intrigue of tradition and the suspense of how the pastor is going to botch the sermon; it all really just comes down to a declaration of heaven or hell. The upheld and the upended. It is the opiate of the masses, say some. And I guess I know that side of it.

But one of the things Megan told me makes me think differently about both. A moment very early on in her diving career when she was training with her Mission Viejo team. It was just after her teammate, Greg Louganis, had won the world championships on ten meter and her coach had informed her she would be beginning on platform. Even though she struggled with a terrible fear of heights.

Her first practice, she sat there on the platform, ten meters up, hugging the pole. Unable to move. Having seen others do the very thing she could not bring herself to do did not make it any easier. To be pulled by aspiration and bridled by fear. She sat there. Struggling perhaps with her sport. But struggling, for certain, with her religion. And finding that common link that brings them both together.

I think of the words Dave used in the meditation.

To be weak, to have weakness, is fundamental to the human experience. We are all weak in one way or another. We despair of our weaknesses. We envy those whom we see as strong, and we wish to be like them. ...We [struggle] to change ourselves, [to challenge ourselves], to fix ourselves... to find strength in our weakness and make peace with [and move past our limitations].

[Because] also fundamental to the human condition are great sources of strength. Strength... not reserved for the hero or the superstar. [But the hero in the making. Calling for the strength residing in all of us,

often going unseen – sometimes even disguised as weakness] – until it is revealed by a fresh perspective. Which, when [found, helps reveal the freedom we sought] to grow into rich, full lives.

Megan sat there, on the platform, waiting. She had talked to God before. At least, she had talked to her coaches. And because coaches are so powerful, seemingly holding your life and your future in their hands; because they see in you what you sometimes cannot see in yourself – talking to them can sometimes feel like talking to God. But it was not God, or even a coach that climbed the ladder toward her in that moment. But a teammate. Greg Louganis. But even though he was not a god, to a teenager who's scared out of her mind he is at least the proven one – the honored son of an exalted program. So, if not God, then pretty close. And he sat down next to her and said simply, 'it's going to be alright. Here's what you have to do...' and 'you're going to survive.' Nothing mystical. Nothing miraculous. Only enough to say, 'I'm here. You're not alone. We're in this together.' Has anyone ever asked to hear more than that from God?

Two things happen in a moment like that which make it religious. We find out that there is more within us than we had let ourselves believe was there. And we find out there is more around us than we had dared to believe there could be. A fresh perspective allows us to see something new. Something empowering. Ennobling. Enlarging. We are more than we thought we were. And we are part of something bigger than we imagined. The heart of the religious impulse.

It's in those moments - ten meters up hugging a pole – where our greatest religious transformation can occur. Pit against something that appears bigger than we are, Something we fear could defeat us, we find a way to summon our strength. Perhaps even pulled from our weakness, we learn to rise, like the boxer from the canvass he'd fallen onto. We risk employing all our strength – even that which we hold in reserve as a buffer to our pride. To rise to the challenge. To truly set our own limits. Instead of settling for the limits fear places upon us.

Whoever may say that this is not a religious impulse, has probably not reached the toughest part of their life yet. Has not faced squarely, their fear of being defeated by something that truly matters to them. And they probably have not summoned the best they have within them. For that requires a worthy challenge. And that is what brings religion into the arena of competitive sports.

I hope you can see that when I talk about the link between religion and competitive sports I am not talking about mandatory prayer before high school football games. Or the perfunctory religious gesturing before stepping into the batters box or after a touchdown. All too often that appears to be posturing more designed for an audience's benefit than our own. The true religious impulse is not proud and has no need to display itself like a peacock.

But it is true that competitive sports has built up that kind of reputation - for being anything but a spiritual practice. And most people don't ever experience for themselves the kind of disciplined religious pursuit that involves overcoming fear and surpassing limits like Megan Neyer did. Few of us ever get to see through the eyes of a world class athlete and experience some of the more profound religious epiphanies that sports and competition can demand. That doesn't mean we are excluded from experiencing sports as a religion, from time to time. But it does mean that most of us have to settle for having that experience from our seat in the crowd.

Dave Lakly, for example, missed service last Sunday because he was at the Falcons game at the Georgia Dome. A place he candidly refers to as 'his 'other' church.' He might say it is his religion. And I know what he means. I know there is religion within being a devotee of a team. Joining together with others, in one place, to pray together for their success. It's like one gigantic 'joys and concerns!' And it would

be hypocritical of us not to see the religion in that. But as such, it can sometimes be difficult to decipher all the subtle parallels between the sport and the religion. So, I have done my best to point out some of the similarities to you. These are the reasons why I think religion and sports are alike to the common fan:

- Both religion and sports show up to root for number 1.
- Both use symbols of worship whether they be a cross/crucifix or a large foam finger.
- Both offer snacks—peanuts and beer or wafers and wine – depending on your tradition - and a little sacrificing of body and blood is expected in both.
- Both expect you to stand for the music and sing whether it's Amazing Grace or Take Me Out To The Ballgame. And both require an offering.
- Both have some history of animal sacrifices – religion for ritual prayer and sports to make the ball.
- In sports they call it rooting, in church they call it praying, but it's largely the same thing.
- In olden religion they would parade out beautiful young women, remove their clothing and sacrifice them to appease the fickle gods. In sports we still have cheerleaders.
- Both have confusing language and “mysteries”. The “triune hypostases of God” in Catholicism versus the “ineligible receiver downfield” in football.
- Religion offers Easter. Sports offers “sudden death”.
- And finally, most every fan has argued that their team is the best. Most every parishioner has argued that theirs is the one true church. Many fights have broken out between teams and between churches.

It is to this last point that I would like to focus and I would like to speak to where most of us find ourselves – as the everyday fan or the regular churchgoer. We know enough about our team to be loyal and enough about the game to follow the rules. We feel pain when our guys struggle and rejoice in success. And most of us will be good sports throughout the season.

And even though we can at least understand, vicariously, the overcoming of weakness and the summoning of strength, we can sometimes miss the underlying religious purpose of the game – especially when that purpose becomes overshadowed or lost behind inflated egos or the quest for personal gain. . And it happens in both religion and sports.

The desire to win at any cost is certainly the downside to competition. Although that kind of desire will still summon inner strength – and may even bring us support and adulation – it misses the larger religious purpose, and becomes something undesirable – even dangerous. In my conversation with Megan, she related to me a question that was posed to some athletes before a recent Olympics Summer Games. It asked ‘if a drug were available that allowed you to win gold but would end your life in five years, would you take it?’ 80% said ‘yes.’ So it is not hard to imagine that someone would sacrifice their teammate, instead of themselves, if they could. Just ask Tanya Harding.

Misconduct is not pretty whether it is clergy sexual abuse or paternity charges and allegations of rape against players. Being ‘juiced’ is no better referring to alcoholism in the church than steroids in sports. And it is no easier to justify having billions of dollars at the Vatican while people starve in South America than it is to see players with multi-million dollar salaries prohibiting kids from being able to afford tickets to the game. And when this misconduct is justified without care for the cost, then it loses any nobility it might otherwise have offered.

It is natural for us to be cynical of religion and sports for these very reasons. After all, the flaws and disappointments are easy to see and even predict. It is hard to deny that both religion and sports are in need of some guidance if they are to retain any nobility. And for better or worse, the world will need to

look to the people in the seats for that guidance. Because cynicism and despair will do little to return nobility where it is needed.

“To be weak, to have weakness, is fundamental to the human experience. We are all weak in one way or another. We despair of our weaknesses.” And this weakness exists in the game of religion and in the business of sports as easily as it exists in any individual human endeavor. Because – when we come right down to it – both sports and religion are only a broad extensions of the individual endeavor.

At the core of both religion and sports there is a great purpose: to make us better people. Help us become part of stronger teams. But there is something more needed. Something weak within both that is causing them to fail. That is the spirit of competition for the sake of ego rather than for the sake of a formidable challenge and worthy endeavor.

What we are missing can be summed up in the creed for the Olympics: “The most important thing in these Olympics is not so much winning as taking part.”

It is not an easy lesson and something we all have to learn – even Olympic athletes. About the question of whether or not to take the drug that would give you the gold but take your life... Megan Neyer admitted she would have probably taken it – when she was younger. But as she went deeper and deeper into her sport and discovered more and more about the meaning of what she was part of – and herself - she said she began to change her mind.

Megan talked about her religion being the Olympics not only because it took her beyond her physical limitations, but because it helped her with her spiritual ones as well. Being part of the games not only allowed her to rise out of her fear and summon strength, not only discover an indescribable, even holy, kinship with her coaches and teammates. But it helped her exemplify a truth buried into the very origin of the games: which is to promote understanding among people through a common pursuit for excellence.

It was in her training and experiences with the Olympics that Megan discovered in others a common humanity. “We were in situations where people saw you at your very best and very worst. Where people loved you and helped you – even if they were on the other side - because we all had the common experience of ‘the hell that we go through.’ There is a ‘war buddy feel’ to it.” Much of what changed within Megan came because of her experience with the other athletes. Not just those on her team or for those who compete for the US. But for those of any sport and from any country. Because she knows what one goes through to play the game at such a level.

We have lost that today in professional sports. Perhaps it is the money involved. Or the politics. And that same malady is threatening the spirit of the Olympics as well. Sadly, Megan Neyer never competed in the Olympic Games. Though she made the team in 1980. That was the year the US boycotted. The reason, you’ll remember, was that we were protesting the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Ironic. And sad.

So Megan lost the chance to compete. But not her chance to learn. That if we could play our sports – or even practice our religion – by the same lessons she discovered, we might all be winners. We might find strength, out of weakness. Uphold - instead of upend - those ‘on the other side.’ And the world might become a heaven rather than hell. Fitting, considering the Greeks intended for the Olympics to be a contest which challenged us to emulate the gods.

How would that look today?

Let me close with an Olympic story. It is said to have occurred at the Special Olympics in Seattle a few years back where nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100 yard dash.

At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a few times, and began to cry.

The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed his hurt to make it better.

Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes.

I read this story on the internet and like many stories I find there I found myself wondering if it really happened. Or if it was just another sappy story. That's when I had to stop and wonder, 'how cynical am I?' And 'how will cynicism change anything. 'How much courage would I have to summon to believe it could have happened?' And 'How much strength would I need to be part of it myself?'

“To be weak, to have weakness, is fundamental to the human experience... But also fundamental to the human condition are great sources of strength... not reserved for the hero or the superstar. [But the hero in the making. Strength resides within all, often unseen – sometimes even disguised as weakness] – until it is revealed by a fresh perspective. Which, when [found, helps reveal the freedom we sought] to grow into rich, full lives.”

When it all comes down to it, it's about faith. Faith that within us, around us and beyond us we can find what is needed to be winners. We needn't always look to the glory of sports. Or to the glory of religion. But to the Glory of Life.