



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Spirit of the Game

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Let's begin with a visualization, with a memory of the body. Recall a time when your whole body felt its strongest, most powerful, vibrant, and alive. What were you doing? Were you riding your bike on a gorgeous fall day, swimming in a favorite body of water, running, either by yourself or on a team, cross-country skiing, hiking, canoeing? Building a house in Mexico? Making love? Having the best round of golf of your life? Dancing?

Go ahead; bask in that memory of your body. Recall your senses, the smells, what the light was like, how the energy moved through you, the exertion, your breath, how completely engaged you were in that moment.

For some of us, this memory is none too distant – you are fortunate. For many of us, this memory is in the distant past, and our distance from a more active life may be a source of sorrow.

For me, attaining physical health and wholeness is a spiritual aspiration. It's true that ideas, relationships, and being of service also feed my spiritual hunger, but I've gained enough self-awareness by now to understand that it's through my body that I come in closest communion with the deepest part of my being.

The last time I lamented to you all about the difficulty of getting back in shape after a pregnancy, I said I was getting old, and you almost guffawed me off the pulpit. SO I won't take that tack this time, but will express with all sincerity how important my relationship to my body is. It's a dimension of spiritual growth that doesn't get enough attention. There's a lot of baggage in our culture around body image, a pervasive feeling that our bodies are never quite as good as they should be. We put youthfulness on a pedestal. We're influenced by a Puritan heritage that denied how connected body and spirit are. It all adds up to a hesitancy to bring up our bodies and spirituality in the same conversation. Sports, on the other hand, professional sports? They dominate our popular culture, emphasizing battle and division far more than the spiritual power of the body or of teamwork.

This sermon is going to try to do two things that are related but different. On the one hand, I want to raise body and spirit, and on the other hand, spirit and sport. Our relationship with our bodies is obviously a very personal thing for each of us, and this sermon should be for everyone, no matter how athletic or able-bodied you feel you are. We all have bodies, and it's important that we consider their role in our spiritual fitness. And, during this season of sports mania, when football is at its height, baseball reaches its culmination for the year, and basketball is, well, usually about to tip off. I also want to reflect on how we can find meaning in teamwork at its honorable best.

Like Hinduism, Unitarian Universalism encourages spiritual growth through the medium that most appeals to us – be that through the mind, through personal devotion, through service, or through the body. Do you know which interface with the divine is most appealing to you? If you do, it's the first step in making more space in your life for feeding your soul, for making sure your spirit sings on a regular basis.

Since it's through my body that I most easily connect to the divine, I'm prioritizing my time to include physical activities in my day-to-day life. Lately this means lots of walking and hiking, since my baby has to come with. We also dance around the house. It also means watching less television to make space for these activities. Recently I came across two compelling reasons why it's wise to reduce your television-viewing: I'm not sure how this could have been determined, but a study concluded that for every hour of television you watch, twenty minutes is subtracted from how long you will live. Another study disturbs me more. When watching television, your brainwaves most closely resemble that of a person in a coma.

Last year I became interested in watching football on TV. I have no idea why – I'm appalled at the recent evidence showing neurological damage occurs even without concussions, just from hits. Yet I romanticize football, particularly high school football. I like the way a small town, a whole community, galvanizes

behind one team. I loved the film *Friday Night Lights* and the television series that followed – at least until it jumped the shark. I haven't watched any football on TV this year – for the reasons I already mentioned, but also because I don't want to teach my kids that TV is important. So, while on maternity leave, to prepare for this sermon, I *read* a bunch of books about football. I naively hoped they would be as good as the *Friday Night Lights* story.

They weren't, but one book I liked is called *Our Boys* by Joe Drape. It's about the Redmen, a high school football team in the tiny town of Smith Center, Kansas, the dead center of the continental United States. This team broke a national winning streak record, with five state championships, and the book focused on how the coach, the town, and the boys did it, back in 2009.

Coach Barta is the Yoda-like head coach who says, "What we do around here real well is raise kids . . . In fact, we do such a good job at it – and I'm talking about the parents and community – that they go away to school and succeed, and then pursue opportunities in the bigger cities . . ." He continues, "None of this is really about football. We're going to get scored on eventually, and lose a game, and that doesn't mean anything. What I hope we're doing is sending kids into life who know that every day means something."

The coach's philosophy was simple: every day was a chance to get a little bit better. In the context of high school football, that meant getting better at respecting and loving your teammates, as well as improving your athletics. To get a little bit better each day is a worthy point of spiritual focus. Better at honoring our spiritual needs, better at discipline, patience, compassion and generosity toward our loved ones, toward strangers, even toward people we don't agree with. There's no limit to the ways each of us can get a little bit better each day – all it takes is deciding this is a worthy daily goal to commit to, and deciding in which areas we want to be better.

Coach Barta also had a few tricks that gave the team a remarkable advantage. One of them was very similar to a technique that Coach Phil Jackson encouraged in his players: visualization. In the hours before each Friday night game, Coach Barta made sure his players were quiet and reflective. If it was an away game, the bus would be silent, even if the destination was hours away. If it was a home game, the players would all lie down in the locker room in dim light for a few hours, some of them listening to inspirational music on earphones, everyone encouraged to visualize how they wanted the game to go. It was a method of pre-thinking. Your mind thought about how your body would move, so when the time came, you wouldn't need to think, your body would perform perfectly without thinking.

Let's go back to that memory of the body we began with. How much thinking was involved? Was the quality that made it great, that perhaps even qualified it as spiritual, that your body transcended your mind?

It's challenging to our liberal religious thinking (pun intended), that there are areas of life that could be enhanced by not thinking. Not-thinking is grounded in Christian and Buddhist ideals of transcending the ego. Thinking leads to worrying about yourself rather than tapping into the oneness of which we are all a part. My husband, for whom snowboarding is a spiritual practice, describes it this way: he says he feels the spirit of sport most when he is moving so fast he doesn't have time to think. He's moving so fast down that mountain the ego can't keep up, the ego is left behind in a snowdrift.

Whether you are athletic or not, try visualizing an activity before doing it, and see if it doesn't make a big difference in how well it goes. Visualize how you'd want a difficult conversation to go, or visualize an interview, a presentation at work. Visualize how you want your day to go before you get out of bed. It's a way to get the clutter and fluster of *thinking too much* out of your way.

Paradoxically, Phil Jackson also instilled the notion of mindfulness in his players, but again, it was a mindfulness set on transcending the ego. It was the only way to make the famous triangle offense work. Without going into too much detail, the triangle offense depends on being mindful of the circumstances on

the court to take advantage of weaknesses in the defense, and then to use all the players to score, not just the star player. The goal is for the team to cooperate so well they move like five fingers on a hand. It requires mindfulness, and understanding your role in the whole.

Again, no matter how sporty you are, we can all benefit spiritually from playing a role on a team, no matter how minor that role is. My feeling is that, when you're on a team, there is no minor role, every piece counts. And I think of a team as any kind of group effort - whether that's putting on a church auction, working on a task force, being a social justice knitter. When we're mindful of how we can best contribute, that is spiritually satisfying. You know, we live in a world that emphasizes star players and triumphant leaders. But how well is that working for us? The truth is what we really need are team players - people who are mindful of surrendering their self-interest for the greater good.

Another bit of research I did for this sermon was to go see Brad Pitt in Moneyball. It was my birthday present at the Gold Class Cinema. I'm 38 by the way, I am getting old. The whole concept of Moneyball that changed baseball also reminded me of something Phil Jackson strove for in his coaching - this idea that everyone has something worthwhile to contribute, no matter how small or un-noteworthy it may seem. Phil Jackson's leadership involved using all twelve basketball players as much as possible; the Oakland A's, a financially strapped team, carefully chose unremarkable players whose talents complemented each other so well that they all added up to create a winning team.

I wish there was a way to apply this concept to our ailing economy, this idea that everyone has something to contribute, if only it is harnessed, if only it is invited to play on the team. It's certainly a concept that can be applied to a church community such as this one - no matter who you are, each and every one of you has something worthwhile to contribute to this beloved community, to this spiritual home we keep.

That's spirit and sport, but let me return to spirit and the body. For a lot of us, how able-bodied, strong, and healthy we are is a direct link to happiness and spiritual well-being. It is for me. If I want to honor my spirit, I have to honor my body. But one dimension of spirit and body doesn't have to do with how in shape you are. It has to do with simple physical presence. I can describe what I mean by recalling an influence of my youth.

That is, the sacred triangle of mind, body, and spirit. This is why I considered naming my daughter Trinity. I learned about the sacred triangle at YMCA overnight camp in rural Michigan where I was a camper and counselor for 14 summers. Camp Echo, which had the perfect location on a peninsula on a beautiful lake, was all about discovering the ways to connect mind, body, and spirit in your life - that fitness of our bodies and fitness of our minds could mean fitness of our spirits. The sacred triangle also had to do with spirituality of the natural world, with feeling your connection to the woods and the lake. My time as a camper was definitely where I first understood the interconnectedness of all life, like Black Elk put it in *The Sacred Pipe*, that peace comes when we "realize that at the center of the Universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that this center is really everywhere. It is within each of us."

No matter how fit you are you can still be physically present in the woods, or in a natural setting, even if you have to drive your car to get there. It's with your body and your senses that you experience the peace, the spirit, of the natural world. The air, the ground, the water, the light, these things we take for granted that make our lives possible, are enjoyed by our bodies. While I recommend adding hiking to the mix, one doesn't need to break a sweat to connect body and spirit *outside*.

One of you asked me over the summer about humanism, and where humanism was at in Unitarian Universalism these days. As I reflected on it, I realized I preach on humanist values on such a regular basis that it would be redundant to point it out. But I'll do so today. You know, I know some of you can see through me, that I chose this sermon topic so I'd have an excuse to read books about sports. I enjoyed it, but it really struck me that the common threads in all the winning coaching techniques are deeply humanist values. Believing that we can each get a little bit better every day reminds me of the belief that we humans

are born with a mixed bag of traits. The point of our lives is to develop the good traits so they eclipse the bad traits. The best traits worth developing happen to be the ones that help teams win – selflessness, mindfulness, and love.

Phil Jackson says that love "is the force that ignites the spirit and binds teams together." It's this love that teaches us how to get so good at choosing the high road that you don't even have to think about it, you just do it. Of course you can sacrifice your ego for the greater good. Of course you can forgo something small for yourself, for everyone.

At its heart, Phil Jackson's leadership philosophy is about being of service, about being receptive, yielding, following, about being in fact, an excellent team player. He says that both leader and team get what they need, if the leader has the wisdom to serve and follow.

So let us all be leaders by finding the wisdom to listen, receive, and serve. Let us each encourage one another to get a little bit better every day, to be the best team players we can be. May our bodies and spirits connect. Go team!