



Celebration of Body and Soul



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“Why did you do that?” I asked my wife, Ellie. In a five-mile road race, she slowed up in the last mile, on purpose, to allow a friend to pass and beat her to the finish line.

“It meant more to her to get there first,” she said. It brought to mind a saying of Trappist monk Matthew Kelly: “To see God in all things you have only to play...with an unselfish heart.”

Wholesome spirituality must include the body in order to complete a holistic union with God. Physical play, whether it’s running, playing basketball, biking, rock climbing, swimming or dancing, is tied to the necessity of the human spirit.

If we put play in a spiritual context, indeed, a spiritual dimension, it will help us to understand life better, to accept absolute concepts—winning and losing, discipline, hard work. It will reveal character and grace. It will enlist intelligence and challenge. It will teach respect for limits and laws. Albert Camus once said, “Sport is where I had my only lessons in ethics.”

More importantly, play is an essential nutrient to the soul. Play makes time wonderfully irrelevant, allowing us to escape for a while from temporal and secular struggles that can eat away at our insides like termites—the mortgage, the bills, the workplace, the college tuition, the desecration of the environment, the crime in our cities, the dead ends and busted dreams.

It allows us to escape into our soul, to introspect, to awaken an innocence that often gets lost, or at least misplaced, in becoming an adult. Reflections and introspections during play possess the power to find ways to peel away those things that lead us asunder and keep our life from becoming merely a compendium of pleasure, power, glory and wealth.



I ran and I ran and was able to liberate and work out ideas that pounded life into words for this essay. I sprinted back to my car, where I keep a pad and pen for just such revelations, and scrawled my ideas down before I lost them.

You have now read those words I pounded into life.

Becoming Complete

Know this: Physical play is not simply an investment in one's health. Sure, it enriches muscle strength, bone density and brain stimulus—those parts of the body that steadily tend to erode as we age.

But also know this: If we stay connected to physical play, we will stay connected to God and to the world, instead of occupying a marginal status in society. There will be a physical and spiritual ripening rather than a rotting.

What Murray Bodo, a Franciscan priest, said in *The Way of St. Francis: The Challenge of Franciscan Spirituality for Everyone*, rings true: "I am a whole person, and until I love my body as much as my soul, I will not be a truly complete human being."

B.G. Kelley was a two-year starting point guard for Temple University's basketball team, earning Honorable Mention All-East and Little All-America honors.

Ernest Hemingway wrote: "If order is to be found in a meaningless universe, a man has to impose that order; a way of doing it is through the ritual of sports."

When I run, there is always a celebration of the body and soul. One reason is this: I run in sacramental environments, where there is a physical and spiritual poetry to my surroundings, where there are mystical signs of nature and where there are God's gifts to us: tall timbers that are enveloping; a vast river with its crisp currents running; geese—symbol bearers of faith and peace—sidling up that river or munching on grass along the banks; the sun dropping down like a gold coin. The soul can never be empty in these surroundings.

I sometimes feel part cheetah, part Thoreau, part Thomas More. I hear a prayer that keeps getting louder and louder: Curse the darkness and light a candle.

Embracing the Journey

The physically spiritual journey takes shape as particular as snowflakes. The journey will make a difference right from the departure point up until the end point. It will not be a lucky drift. I know.

One autumn day long ago, I looked for my name on the locker room door at Philadelphia's Roman Catholic High School. My name wasn't there. I had failed to make the high school basketball team. My teacher, Father Walter Conway, noticed the dejected look on my face when I shuffled into his Latin class.

"What's wrong, son?" he asked.

"I got cut from the basketball team."

He pulled me aside and said, “Son, you’re going to have to accept suffering and challenge as part of the search for fulfillment. Accept the suffering, then accept the challenge and pray to God that he will show you the way to do something that will earn you a spot on the team next year.” Those words stuck to my psyche like a first kiss sticks to your lips.

I came to a decision. I would fuse the physical and the spiritual. While running four miles a day, I would pray to be as prepared as I could be to make the team, so that by next fall, when basketball tryouts came around again, I would, if nothing else, be in far superior conditioning than everyone else, but also in good shape spiritually.

Of course, too, I worked on my ball-handling and my shooting. I chose a place to run in Philly that is a piece of paradise in the city: Fairmount Park. From that very first autumn day when I began, Fairmount Park put a purchase on my soul. The leaves on the trees along the banks of the Schuylkill River had turned to chroma yellow, carrot orange, saffron gold and scarlet red. The sun shimmered on the water’s belly. The air was crisp as celery.

This was a refuge and counsel that God provided for me. I even ran in the winter there, when it was so cold that icicles formed on my eyebrows. (I guess that was part of the suffering!)

When springtime arrived, so did the blossoming cherry trees dotting the landscape, the soft, gentle breeze coming off the water and warming me, and the rhythmic slicing of oars from the scullers on the river, keeping time with my rhythms of prayer.

Then finally summer, when it was a matter of survival, when the intense heat swarmed me with such lock-up I harbored thoughts of bagging my runs. (Again, the suffering!) But I kept reflecting on what my Latin teacher at Roman had told me: “Accept suffering and challenge as part of the search for fulfillment.”

When autumn came, once again I stood in front of the locker room door, reading the names of those who had made the varsity basketball team. My name was there. I had arrived at my physical and spiritual destination, and the journey was as important as the arrival.

I found out a lot not only about myself, but also about who I would become. I would not only become a starter but also far exceed my dreams: I would earn All-League honors and lead the Catholic League North Division in scoring. More importantly—at least to my pop—basketball led to a college scholarship.

Making a Spiritual Connection

British writer William Hazlitt said, “The soul of a journey is liberty.” It’s not easy to sit down and write. Or perhaps the sitting down is easy and the writing is hard.

I was having trouble coming up with enough ideas for this essay—writer’s block, some people call it. I needed to free myself, feel a sense of abandonment. I needed to do something physical to unlock myself mentally.

So I jumped in my running shoes and headed for a place called Valley Green. Valley Green is an outdoor monastery which can silence the ticking of the clock and blank out the silly and irrelevant things that spin around us in this world. Valley Green is spiritually connecting. In fact, it is a place I came to when my parents died, to release my sorrow, to talk to them, to commune with God and ask him to brace me for life without them. The sacramental solitude and peace I find there is a physical prayer.

This day I wanted to be released from the curse of the blank page.