

“Good for Something”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

In preaching, context is everything.

So, I’ll confess that I was very tempted
to prepare two sermons for this morning.

One for silver and the other for gold,
all depending on the outcome of the game. . .¹

One that spoke to the need for hope amid the despair of crushing defeat,
the other about the deep satisfactions of pride and joy
in the wake of a resounding victory.

In the end, I wrote only one.

So, I’m happy that Canada came through this morning.

I don’t know if I could bear a congregation of inconsolably broken hearts all at
once!

For a sermon centred on passion,
one could do much worse than having the Olympics as a backdrop.

Passion has been on abundant display
everywhere we’ve turned in recent days—
from the rinks and slopes and curling sheets of Sochi,
to the countless interviews and studio conversations on the CBC.

Many of us have gotten caught up in the excitement,

¹ The Gold Medal Men’s Olympic Hockey Game was played in real-time in Sochi at 7:00am this morning.

taking inspiration from these athletes who've pushed themselves so hard to go "faster, higher, and stronger" than they ever have before.

More than a few of you have confessed over the past couple of weeks that you've been so inspired, you've taken up the noble winter sport of Couch Potato free-styling in front of the tv.

It's probably a very good thing that this morning, at this very hour, the Olympics come to an end, half a world away. I'm not sure how much more inspired inactivity we could actually take!

Whether we love the games or loathe them, these two weeks every other year offer a raw and compelling glimpse into the workings of the human spirit.

Though the Olympics are often surrounded by scandal and corruption, and their manipulative media coverage can inspire a jaded cynicism, it seems we're usually quite eager to look beyond all of that.

Instead, so many of us choose again and again to look into this biannual ritual and see reflected in the triumphs and defeats of athletes from around the world, something, perhaps, of our own trials and tribulations, as well as our accomplishments and victories.

If you're like me, from time to time during these games, you've found your eyes welling up unexplainably.

The other night on our own couch, Bob turned to me and we chuckled after confirming that we were both a bit weepy after watching the mother of Charles and Francois Hamelin describe her family's long journey to that Olympic speed-skating rink.

She spoke of the passion that's so clearly on display in her two sons whipping at lightening speed around the rink.

And, yet, passion was just as evident, if not more, in the sacrifices she and the rest of her family have made to bring her children's hopes and dreams into the realm of very real possibility.

Watching that scene, I was reminded of the many Olympic events that everyday people all around the globe undertake out of a love—out of a deep passion—to achieve some greater good, to serve some need beyond themselves.

One of the most celebrated athletes on Team Canada this year, of course, was a man who didn't win a medal at all.

It was Gilmore Junio, the speed skater who gave up his spot in the 500 metre to his teammate Denny Morrison, who went on in that race to win the silver.

We can only wonder, or maybe even marvel, at the strength of will required for someone to give up a shot, no matter how remote, at achieving an Olympic dream—all in the hope that someone else might make the most of being given a second chance in their stead.

That Morrison would go on to win a silver wasn't guaranteed. That he did, made Junio's offer of the opportunity all the more poignant.

As moving as it is, we forget that stories like these play out in every corner of this planet, with regular people making extraordinary sacrifices so that someone else might have a firmer footing in life.

People everywhere serving Life in the commitments they make to ensure the well-being of others, whether it's a mom juggling her job and the demands of family life, or a guy who dedicates himself year after year to teaching new immigrants the language they'll need to succeed.

There are countless Olympic achievements made by common people, who upon realizing that life itself is truly a team sport, take up the work of justice and equality for all, labour in the cause of peace, or devote their days to meeting the practical concerns of those in deepest need.

Passion can take many different forms.

I think that's why we look at our television screens
and feel a lump forming in our throats whenever we see athletes
come through and accomplish what they set out to do—
when they achieve in a spectacular way
some long-held dream that has beckoned and propelled them ever onward.

Don't we see in them some passion we feel stirring within ourselves?

That said, I think too often we beat ourselves up
for not reaching the same lofty heights of human achievement.

We fail to notice the various "sports," if you will,
in which we could and should give ourselves more credit—
those routine aspects of life that deserve recognition and praise.

The poet Lynn Powell captures this notion in her poem
"Acceptance Speech."²

The radio's replaying last night's winners
and the gratitude of the glamorous,
everyone thanking everybody for making everything
so possible, until I want to shush
the faucet, dry my hands, join in right here
at the cluttered podium of the sink, and thank

my mother for teaching me the true meaning of okra,
my children for putting back the growl in hunger,
my husband, *primo uomo* of dinner, for not
begrudging me this starring role—

without all of them, I know this soup
would not be here tonight.

And let me just add that I could not
have made it without the marrow bone, that blood—
brother to the broth, and the tomatoes

² Lynn Powell, "Acceptance Speech," from *The Zones of Paradise*. University of Akron Press, Akron, Ohio.

who opened up their hearts, and the self-effacing limas,
the blonde sorority of corn, the cayenne
and oregano who dashed in
in the nick of time.

Special thanks, as always, to the salt—
you know who you are—and to the knife,
who revealed the ripe beneath the rind,
the clean truth underneath the dirty peel.

—I hope I've not forgotten anyone—
oh, yes, to the celery and the parsnip,
those bit players only there to swell the scene,
let me just say: sometimes I know exactly how you feel.

But not tonight, not when it's all
coming to something and the heat is on and
I'm basking in another round
of blue applause.

It seems that one of the most serious shortcomings of our society
is our failure to celebrate common accomplishment.

To give credit where it is due.

To sing the praises of the ordinary.

To honour lives well lived with lifetime achievement awards.

To recognise in the daily grind of life the extraordinary miracle of it all.
And to award medals for the marathons
that most of us run day in and day out.

I'm not so much suggesting here
the idea of giving everyone a trophy simply for participating—
a practice that's become standard in children's sports to boost self-esteem.

What I'm suggesting instead is a way of seeing life whole—
recognising a life as the set of very real challenges it can be,
and honouring the mighty ongoing effort that is required
to live that life with any measure of courage and integrity and grace.

I think in our Olympians, we see something of ourselves.
We see in their singular focus, a striving of our own.
We see in their defeat, the failures that litter our path.
We see in their triumph—especially over adversity—
the victory we've tasted or so deeply hoped to know ourselves.

It's really no wonder that we get weepy.

Their achievements speak to the longing I think we all share
to make something of our lives—
to let our lives speak to what is within us.

Henry David Thoreau, the famed Unitarian poet of Walden Pond,
who left behind his life in the village of Concord, Massachusetts
and struck out for a life in the nearby forest, famously advised
that we should be not merely good, but that we be “good for something.”

Thoreau lived in a time when the Unitarian tradition in New England
was articulating a foundational belief in essential, innate human goodness.

This was in stark and intentional contrast to the Calvinist doctrine of total
depravity, the idea that humans are born broken and enslaved to sin.

Unitarianism argued that we were born not in original sin,
but with innate goodness,
what we today speak of as inherent worth and dignity.

With that high estimation of our value
was also a recognition of our need for improvement—
what was sometimes referred to as self-cultivation,
an ongoing effort to strengthen our own character
by living as closely as possible to our guiding values.

I think sometimes to our detriment, over the years,
we Unitarians have focussed on the call to improvement, maybe even
perfection, without also recalling our bedrock belief in human goodness.

Innate human goodness doesn't mean that we are perfect.
It means that we don't have to be.

It means that we can embrace from the outset
an understanding that the act of being born into this world
imbues our lives with dignity and worth,
even when we don't fully live into it,
even when we don't feel particularly dignified or worthy.

I thought of this the other day
after seeing Patrick Chan's free skate in the men's finals.

It was hard to watch.

The pressure on him was immense.
He wanted and needed and worked for years
to be at his peak in that defining moment.

It's difficult to remember now how beautifully he skated.
It's easy to forget his power and finesse and grace,
and focus in, instead, on the flaws—
the couple of times he stepped out of a jump.

It was enough to cost him the gold medal.

But what was so painful to watch was the endless cycle of interviews
that seemed to rob him of his dignity and raise questions of his worth.

When he apologized for disappointing Canada,
something in my heart broke.

Amid the chagrin he so clearly felt,
it also seemed that he was feeling a diminished sense of self-worth.

In that moment, I wanted to share with him the words
of Mary Oliver's poem, "Wild Geese."

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Over and over, the world calls to you,
announcing your place in the family of things. . .

How hard it can be to trust that our place is firmly secured.

How hard it can be to trust in the grace of this world.

How hard it can be to accept that we are good enough—
to accept that we *are* enough.

Now, that's not to say that striving after achievement is unadvised.
If anything, it is beautiful and ennobling.

It is to say, instead, that the measure of our worth
is not to be found in our failure or our success.

By the gift of our birth, we are already good for something.

May we live into that truth.

Whatever the sport in which we find ourselves competing,
no matter the mountains that are ours to scale,
whether we find ourselves hurtling down a slope
or careening across the ice,
may we find the courage in every moment
to trust that we are worthy because we are alive.

May we live, then, loving what we love,
and pouring our passion into pursuits

that bring us joy and stir our souls.

Amen.