

The Far Side of the Fall
August 8th, 2021
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. The title of this morning's reflection is The Far Side of the Fall. It's inspired by the spirit of healthy competition, by what we saw happening in the Olympics and by my 7th-grade teacher, Mr. Tiplady.

Mr. Tiplady was my coolest and grooviest teacher but he infuriated me. He was the coach of the junior high school baseball team at Pine Brook, where I went in New Jersey. And it was bad enough that there were no try-outs—everyone who wanted to be on the team was on the team, no questions asked. What was really terrible about Mr. Tiplady and his coaching was the fact that everyone who wanted to play in the games could play in the games...and sometimes, our team was winning, going into the final innings of the game...and Mr. Tiplady would switch out the star players if other kids wanted to play. It was beautiful social practice but it did not lead to the first prize. In fact, it led us to the last prize. We lost every game. Every last one...except the game of life. In that game, we were then and are now, undefeated. To all souls, I say, "Good morning." It is good to be together.

I'm hooked on this film. It's a hokey hero film. I'm sure that, at 56, I'm still working through my childhood fantasies of being able to save the day. Every good boy wants to save the whole, wide world. And I was one of those boys and I still am one of those boys. I just no longer play with fire engines, super-heroes that can fly or GI Joe with the action grip. I have far more sophisticated diversions. I have evolved. Well, at least I tell myself that I have.

So, the film that I'm hooked on is called *Divergent*. I think it's pretty cool. It's a PG-13, post-apocalyptic, dystopian, thriller-action film in which the two lead characters find themselves and each other after the end of the world.

The hero in the film is a young woman named Tris. Beatrice was her given name but she was in the process of differentiating. She was pulling away from her parents, from her family and even from her faction. You see, in this future world that survives the present one, society is organized into a series of factions. There are five factions. I could explain it to you but it's probably better if I let Tris do it. She's more articulate than I am and has the lines. She knows the passage by heart and she speaks it in the opening scene of the film. I'm not sure but I think that it's set in war-torn Chicago. For some reason, the Windy City was the place to be. Tris explains. She says,

We're lucky to be in The City. They say the war was terrible. That the rest of the world was destroyed. The founders built [a] wall to keep us safe...and they divided us into five groups—[five] factions—to keep the peace.

The smart ones, the ones who value knowledge and logic are in [a faction called] Erudite. They know everything. [The people of the faction called]

Amity farm the land. They're all about kindness and harmony, always happy. [If you are a Candor, you] value honesty and order. [You] tell the truth, even when [others wish that you] wouldn't.

And then there's Dauntless. They are our protectors. They are our soldiers, our police. I always thought they were amazing—brave, fearless and free. Some people think Dauntless are crazy, which they kind of are.

The way the film unfolds, most of the people who watch and enjoy the movie want to be Dauntless. They do thrilling things. They wear cool leather. They have pretty rad tattoos...and they still nurture childhood fantasies of being able to save the whole, wide world.

There is a test that more or less tells which faction you're supposed to be in but there's a rule—and it applies to everyone—you get to choose your faction. No matter what your test results are, you still get to choose. The only thing is, once you choose, you can't go back. The choice that you make in this movie is written in blood and sealed with fire. It's a great premise for a movie about two kids that are finding themselves...two young hearts ever so gently, coming of age in a cruel and harsh world. Continuing, Tris, says

[The faction by family background] is Abnegation. The others all call us "stiffs." We lead a simple life—selfless, dedicated to helping others. We even feed the Factionless, the ones who don't fit in anywhere. And because we're public servants, we're trusted to run the government. It all works. Everyone knows where they belong. Except for me.

And then, the cool music plays and we all start rooting for Tris to find herself.

Only the best survive and the competition is fierce. Tris doesn't know if she's cut out for the faction that she's chosen. After a poor showing one day on the tests that would prepare her for admission, after the exams that would qualify her to become a member of Dauntless, she has to go to the hospital and, unbeknownst to her, she's cut from the team. Her best friends break the news to her as gently as they can right there, at the bedside.

She's crushed. She gets depressed...before she reached back for her reserves, bound and determined to give the day her very, very best.

The train is leaving the station. The train carrying those who are attempting to qualify for Dauntless is leaving the station by the hospital. Tris can hear the steam engines getting ready to depart. She can hear the heavy clang as the strong-iron brakes of the train as they release their holdings. Slowly, at first, the train begins to inch its way down the track. Tris doesn't lie there, defeated. She gets up. She gets dressed and she chases the train. If she misses the train, she's shown herself what resilience truly means. And if she makes the train, good Lord! God knows what will happen.

If we had taken the test that tells us what faction we are (or should be), who among us would be satisfied with the test results? That depends, I suppose, on the accuracy of the test...among other things. In which faction would you be? In which faction would you place yourself? Would you place yourself in Erudite? ...in Amity? In Candor? 'Come on, now. Tell the truth.' Would you place yourself in Abnegation?

...or in Dauntless? I guess it comes down to this: Are smart? ...kind? ...honest?
...selfless? ...or are you brave?

These are the questions that the young and young at heart will gently ask themselves, trying to find the tribe that knows their nature. These are the questions that the world will boldly ask the young and young at heart. And in the clamor, under the pressure, who knows how things will break. How do we lose the din? Once upon a time, we sang,

Everybody's talking at me
But I don't hear a word they're saying
Only the echoes of my mind

It can be difficult to hear our own hearts beat when there is so much commotion all around us.

One of my favorite photographs of Martin Luther King was taken in a newsroom. The interview was over and reporters were all scurrying, frantic, racing the way and that. Striking staccato at typewriters with fore fingers (and with surprising accuracy). There was a whirlwind of ideas in the room, represented by people and by pressure and by papers being passed about. And in the center of the maelstrom, in the eye of the hurricane (as it were) was an absolutely still and stationary Martin Luther King. So much energy was set in motion, was released by his being there. I wonder what that was like for him then—to witness all of that, to be at the center of all of that and yet, strangely, apart from it? I wonder what that was like for him. He looked pretty beleaguered in the picture.

And I wonder what it's like for Simone Biles. Like Martin, I imagine, she, too, is in the eye of a storm. My God. The pressure!!! The pretenses!!!! The powerlessness!! The punditry!!! It must be so hard when you are a world-class athlete with a shockingly consistent history of success. It works against you in a way. When spectacular achievement is normalized, when winning a title that says to everyone that you are the best in all the world receives "as expected" reactions!!! Simone Biles knows the fierceness of the competition worldwide. She knows what it is to turn and face that competition. She knows what it is to turn and face herself. I don't always have the courage to do that. Less and less, these days—for some reason...and I don't always want the courage to face all of that. Not right away, at any rate. Not when things are twisting in my heart and soul. Not when I feel lost in the maelstrom.

What must it have been like for Simone Biles over the last few weeks in Tokyo, with the eyes of the whole wide world bearing down upon her...and judging? I wonder if she was able to find a quiet place within the maelstrom, an eye in the storm that was a rest. Stationary. The stillpoint where true balance can be found. Once upon a time we used to sing,

I'm going where the sun keeps shining through the pouring rain
Going where the weather suits my clothes
Banking off of the northeast winds, sailing on a summer breeze
And skipping over the ocean like a stone

I wonder if Simone Biles was able to find that easy place, that place where the soul bounces back in time enough to say “Yes!” to life...because Kerri Strug didn’t really have that kind of time.

Former Olympic gymnast, Kerri Strug, was clearly hurting in the 1996 Games in Atlanta but the pressure was on. The whirlwind was mighty. The pressure was on the U.S Team. I went back and found the old footage. I was moved and also disturbed by what I was learning.

I can’t share the gymnastics with you. I would make a horrible commentator. I don’t envy those folks. They have a very difficult job to do...and on the stage of the world. I don’t envy them. So, I can’t walk you through it but please, take my word on this. The athletic performances were fantastic. The talent from all around the world is absolutely amazing...and the faith that the gymnasts have in their coaches—then and now! And it wasn’t all good, of course. Not by any means. Like I said, I was moved and disturbed by what I was learning.

I found the video clip that I was looking for. It was entitled, “Kerri Strug’s Unforgettable Determination to Win Gymnastics Olympic Gold.” It had 7,259,437 views. What struck me most about this absolutely MASSIVE body of online spectators was how frequently they negatively reviewed the video that they watched...and I think that I know why. I think that the reason has to do with the word, resilience. Better said, I think that the reason has to do with a misunderstanding of the word, resilience. According to the narrator of the video I watched,

US gymnast Kerri Strug made her first Olympic Games appearance in 1992. [] She was part of the team that won a Bronze Medal in the All-Around, behind Romania and the Unified Team of former Soviet republics.¹

Now, Kerri Strug was injury-prone. She pushed herself hard and got hurt a lot. The video narrator went on,

For decades, the [All-Around gymnastic competition] had been dominated by the USSR. In 1996, it was a strong field...but the US was leading going into the final event, the vault.

Now, the US Team was striving to secure victory, meaning that they wanted to place themselves beyond the reach of their competitors. So, no matter how well they did as the day wore on, the US Team would remain on top. Everything came down to US gymnast Keri Strug. She was strong and fierce but she was tiny—4 and a half feet tall...and 19 years old. And all that pressure... I can’t really imagine what that must have been like. The narrator continued...

The crowd was on its feet...but Keri wasn’t. She couldn’t stick the landing. The bad news didn’t end there. [] Strug had torn two ligaments in her ankle. In normal circumstances, that would mean the end of her Olympic Games

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<https://www.msn.com/en-us/sports/olympics/kerri-strug-shouldn-e2-80-99t-have-been-forced-to-do-that-vault/ar-AAMN1ey>

[but her coach, Béla Károlyi] told Strug that they needed her to go one more time to ensure their victory against the Russians.

Now, Károlyi was famous for pushing his athletes, for placing enormous, physical demands upon them.

So, I get the world stage/high competition dimension of all of this—that part is not lost on me—but I can't help myself. I hear this as a spy film about the KGB or like that Rocky movie when the hero fights against the Soviet, southpaw slugger. All the drama and the pressure and everything. It was a little much...for me...and for Keri Strug. The narration went on:

[Keri] prepared for her second and final vault. All eyes were on her as she sprinted down the runway. [She stuck the landing the second time and] the US had their first Gold Medal in the Team All-Around.

The narrator is then silent for almost half a minute—from time-marker 0:03:11 seconds to 0:03:39—during which time, Keri Strug is grimacing in pain, hopping on her right leg in protection of her left ankle and collapsing in obvious distress on the landing mat. She's unable to walk...unable to rise...while the home crowd cheers and waves American flags.

The whole scene is set to music and we're encouraged as onlookers to bear witness to the triumphant end of the hero's journey but what we actually see with our own eyes is heartbreaking. Keri's ankle is packed in ice, bound up and bandaged publicly. She couldn't walk. She couldn't hobble. She had to be "carried off the field" effectively ...to an ambulance or some sort of emergency medical facility for immediate treatment. They show all of this before cutting the Awards Ceremony, the playing of the national anthem and the raising of the flags. The narrator concludes the whole thing by saying,

The sheer determination and heart shown by Strug had secured her place in Olympic history. The team went home as heroes but it was Strug who provided the iconic moment. Pain is temporary. Pride is forever.

Hmm. The whole thing made me think of Simone Biles, of course—the high-performing, highest-ranking US gymnast—and it made me think of Mr. Tiplady.

You remember the old adage, "It doesn't matter if you win or lose. It matters how you play the game." Mr. Tiplady really believed that...and he not only believed it, he lived it out. I wonder what Béla Károlyi would think about that old adage. I wonder if he'd tell me that that kind of attitude doesn't ever lead to gold medals. And I wonder what Béla Károlyi would tell me about Mr. Tiplady...and I wonder what the two of them would say about the pressures of high-level athletic competition after the scandals of 2015.

We would be wise to revisit the meaning of healthy competition, not warfare but healthy competition. Mr. Tiplady taught me a lot about that subject...and so did another teacher by the name of Mr. Keating. If you recall (and if you've seen the movie), Mr. Keating is the main character in a 1980s film called Dead Poets Society. As Keating, himself, would be quick to explain (and, here, I am quoting from the film),

The Dead Poets were dedicated to sucking the **marrow** out of life. That's a phrase from [Henry David] Thoreau we'd invoke at the beginning of every meeting. You see, we would gather at the old Indian cave and take turns reading from Thoreau, Whitman, Shelley; the biggies. Even some of our own verse [but] we didn't just "read" poetry, we let it drip from our tongues like honey. Spirits soared, women swooned and gods were created...

Poetry can do that. Every time we lift our souls to new possibilities, we create something that is holy. I think that's partly why the Olympics matters so much to us...why we push ourselves, sometimes, even beyond the breaking point. I don't think that's always wise but I understand why we do it.

I bring up the film, *Dead Poets Society*, because of what it says about sport. Poets are not always athletes, are not often athletes, actually...and yet, this teacher of poetry has something interesting to say on the subject. Mr. Keating, incidentally, was played by the actor Robin Williams. Keating reminded his students that...

...devotees may argue that one sport or game is inherently better than another. For me, sport is actually a chance for us to have other human beings push us to excel.

Keating did this, not in the classroom—where one might expect a teacher of poetry to do his work—but outdoors, on a soccer field, on a cloudy-misty morning, just like this one. He gathered his students around him. He huddled them up, like they were a team. Then, he handed his students little slips of paper...and printed on these slips of paper were lines of poetry—Thoreau, Whitman, Shelley... You know, the biggies. He scattered across the field as many soccer balls as he had students. He had the students read the poetry and kick soccer balls across the field.

Pitts: 'Oh, to struggle against great odds. To meet enemies undaunted.'

KICK!

Boy #2: "To be a sailor of the world, bound for all ports."

KICK!

"Louder! Louder!!!" he'd encourage them.

Boy #3: "To mount the scaffolds. To advance to the muzzles of guns with perfect nonchalance."

KICK!

Meeks: "To dance, clap hands, exalt, shout, skip, roll on, float on!"

KICK!

Dalton: "To, indeed, be a god."

They embodied the poetry...as deeply as any gymnast, any coach and any teacher.

Now, the video clip I watched about Keri Strug didn't cover this. I think that's why so many people reviewed it negatively—4,000 times with slightly more than 7 million views. And, if you're doing the math in your head, you're right. It's not a high percentage but I look at it this way. According to the Public Broadcasting Service (or PBS, as it is better known), the rate of voter fraud that we encounter

here, in the United States, is tiny—0.0000044%. [5 zeros] That's a tiny amount. By comparison, the rate at which spectators negatively reviewed the gymnastics video we've been talking about is 0.056%. The negative review rate is more than 10,000 time greater than the rate of voter fraud in this country and, as you know, the idea of voter fraud has been national news for months—from the run up to the November 2020 presidential election to the insurrection on January 6th and still today, with the egregious swath of anti-voting rights legislation in states across the country amounting to what Stacy Abrams, Raphael Warnock, Heather McGhee and others have called "Jim Crow in new clothes."

Sometimes, we push the meaning of the game beyond the breaking point. We are not here to win...but to live and to learn and to love. We are here to be with one another...in community. We are here to grow and to share our blessings...even against the slings and arrows that try to convince us to do otherwise. Winning and losing are not vulgar things. They are not identities. They are oscillating, mutual experiences that are inseparable from one another. Each experience has its gift and has its gift...and has its gift for the other. We need each other. It's true. We really do. A poet writes,

I've heard it said that the weight of the world's problems
Is enough to make the ball fall right through space
That it ain't even worth it to live
With all that's going wrong

Well, let me just go down as saying
That I'm glad to be here
Here with all the same pain and laughs
Everybody knows

Some men think they're born to be king
Maybe that's true
But I think passing love around
Is all we were born to do

Let them build their kingdoms
Let them make the laws for this world to heed
Cause you and I make life worth living
Right here in each other's arms

I'm here to love you, baby
No more loneliness
No more emptiness
I'm here to love you

Let them build their kingdoms
Let them make the laws for this world to heed
Cause you and I make life worth living
Right here in each other's arms

I'm here to love you

No matter who we are and no matter who we choose to be—whether we are smart...or kind...or honest...or selfless...or brave...or divergently all of these, may we be fortunate enough to know the deep blessing of resilience, the winning that is possible on the far side of the fall.

May it be so. Blessing be and amen.