

Flowers for the Wrestling of Angel
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North Universalist Chapel Society

She looks cute enough with those flowers and all but apparently, she was prepared to fight...in August of 2021. It seems to me that she was more than prepared. All of Indiana must have been so very proud.

The photograph on the cover of your Orders of Service was taken in Tokyo, at the summer games. The Olympics were in Japan that year...and Sarah Hildebrandt from the town of Granger was bringing home the bronze! According to the South Bend Tribune, Sarah,

...tried hard for five full minutes to grab hold of her opponent's leg and roll her on her back in [the match]. When she finally succeeded just 30 seconds before the final horn, the emotions of a decade of training plus 24-hours of dwelling on recent heartbreak all came out at once.¹

Sarah had suffered a "devastating loss" in the women's wrestling semifinals the day before. "I know I messed up," she said,

...because I stopped and [because] I froze. I wasn't going to let that happen again today. I was determined to give it everything I had.

Give the good fight everything you have. This is what we can learn from wrestlers like Sarah Hildebrandt. Give the good fight everything you have...because the spirit of the good fight will hold on fast. It's powerful and tight. The spirit of the good fight holds on to us and it will not let us go.

There is a story in the Bible, the story of Jacob and his brother Esau and the feud they had with one another...because Jacob was unkind and he took something from his brother and then ran away. He banished himself because he could not face what he had done. Jacob ran into the wilderness and he spent his time alone, deeply uncomfortable with himself and what he had done. And then, deep in the night, a stranger approached him—adversarially, conflictually—and the two engaged in a wrestling match that lasted until the morning,

Jacob was left all alone, and there a man wrestled with him until daybreak... When the man saw that he could not overpower Jacob, he struck the socket of Jacob's hip and dislocated it as they wrestled. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." "What is your name?" the man asked. "Jacob," he replied.... Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men, and you have prevailed."... And Jacob requested, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed Jacob there....

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<https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/sports/2021/08/07/granger-native-sarah-hildebrandt-wins-wrestling-bronze-tokyo/5523812001/>

I will not let you go until you bless me... I find this to be a beautiful sentiment...because we wrestle and we struggle and we go through things in life, things the don't always end well, things with real-life consequences. Grief sets in sometimes...when we win and when we lose. Grief sets in when we are not fighting the good fight. It's such a journey, this life that we are creating for ourselves. A poet writes,

I went walking yesterday, I was finding me a way to fly
For the wind to come my way, I'm busy thinking about...
"Well, maybe...if I try"
And so I hold out my hand, still unsure of what I may find
As the rise and fall of winds recall a time I left behind
Deep in your memory and so many miles away

On my first trip across the country, I had had a hip-breaking fight with one of my closest friends in life. It wasn't a good fight. It was a bad one and there were serious consequences. We were losing one another and he and I both knew it. So, I wrote these words, this poem, my song in an effort to heal my breaking heart, in an effort to reconcile my feelings. I wrote,

I've been talking to a friend, reminding him again to see
Moving once across the sky is the sun that he and I get for free
And so I hold out my hand, if just for the warmth it might bring
I do my best to fill my pockets at this holy offering
Deep in your memory, do you remember me?
Because I don't want to lose you at all and I feel like I'm losing

We weren't wrestling with the angels. It wasn't that beautiful. It wasn't special. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't holy in any way. As they say in the movies, it didn't have "the lingering sense of divinity to it." It was just a fight...3,000 miles away from home and in the desert of our journey. We weren't wrestling with the angels. We weren't wrestling with God. We were just having a terrible fight.

I can't remember what it was about. He was constantly grinding the gears of my brand new used car but that wasn't really the issue. I'd love to tell you that we found our way through it but we didn't. Not on that trip. We did over time, years later but that trip ended in disaster. I was sure that I had lost something that was very dear to me. I was sure that my dear friend (who was my brother, effectively)... I was pretty sure that my brother had taken it, taken something that was precious to me...precious to us both.

The fight started up when we were still headed west. It flared up several times. The first few times, I thought we could get over it—we both did—but over time, life showed us that we were wrong.

I was really shaken by that process. I was shattered. And yet, I knew quite deeply that we would someday work things out. I just didn't know how long it would take. I didn't know if I was just being idealistic. The healing did happen but it took us a few years. We remained civil and friend-ly but until the whole process had run its course, there was always something missing. Even then, though, we

simply would not let each other go. And I've had real reasons to...and he has as well, I'm sure...although my reasons were better than his and his reasons were stupid. I say that half-joking and as a gesture of respect. I had deepest respect for my old adversary. I still do. I wrestled with him for years but never felt like he was an angel. When I wrestled with him, I never felt like I was wrestling with God. When the trip was over and I was finally alone again, I felt like I was wrestling with the angels all of the time. I felt like I was wrestling with God...because I was helpless. I felt so hopeless. I felt unable to make things right.

Fortunately for me, I didn't have to. The arc of life made things right for the both of us because he and I, both of us had done two very important things. First, we put our hearts in an honest place—meaning that both of chose, soul-level deep, to be forgiving, honest and true. Second, we allowed ourselves to fight the good fight—meaning that we sang faithfully, like a manta, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

We have a hymn that we sing sometimes...called When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place. It's cute enough but it's also fierce and powerful, especially the refrain.

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

It isn't complicated—this song that we sometimes sing—and neither is it complicated to love soul-level. It's hard to do it because it requires risk and intimacy, because it requires us to face life honestly and life is not as safe as wish it was sometimes. Putting our heart in a holy place helps us to fight the good fight and to fight it well.

Sarah Hildebrandt fights the good fight. Sarah Hildebrandt, the one from Granger, Indiana, not far from South Bend...the one who wrestled on the stage of the whole, wide world...in the Tokyo Olympics. She fights the good fight...and the spirit of the good fight asks us for everything we have and that hard for us. It's hard and beautiful.

Sarah was interview after she made the Olympic team on her second attempt and was bound for Tokyo. She was shown a news clip from four years earlier, when she tried the first time. The newscaster said, Sarah Hildebrandt competed this weekend for a shot at the US Olympic Games...”

You could see the emotion welling up inside of her. With just these 13 words, the world-class wrestler was brought to tears. She said, “I don't know why this is gonna make me cry.”

The newscaster continued to recount the events of the past. Sarah was watching the old news clip on a cell phone.

Hildebrandt won her first match at the Olympic trials in Iowa City and then lost her next two. This ends her Olympic dream for this year, but she vows to be back.

The tears continue to flow. She was strong—a fighter is strong—but she was tender and graceful too. The good fight asks for it all. Give the good fight everything you have. Everything.

Sarah kept her promise. She had come back in a serious way. She secured a spot on the U.S. Olympic women's wrestling team in 2021. The interviewer asked her about her journey, the long road that led her to this achievement. She said,

From the beginning, it was always like 'I want to be an Olympian' or 'I want to be a champion.' Something like that. But, you know, I think I was saying that because that's what you're supposed to say.

Sarah's older brothers were wrestlers. Competition at high levels was the culture of the family. Sarah didn't know when she was younger whether or not it was important to her. She was pretty good at it—she'd survived her brothers—but she didn't yet know if it was her calling. She asked,

What is it coming from my heart? Or was coming from other people? There were lots of doubts. Do you know what I'm saying? There were lots of doubts, lots of doubting. It really wasn't until I dislocated my elbow and I was away from the wrestling mat...and in that moment, with all that self reflection, I was like, "Oh, I want to give us a full shot" and "I want this."

I didn't mean for this to happen but can't help but notice that parallel. God had dislocated Jacob's hip during Jacob's dark night in the wilderness all alone. Out of that experience, Jacob-come-Israel had remade himself. In ways, the same was true of Sarah Hildebrandt...after she had dislocated her elbow. She was able to see things differently, from a different resting point. In the deepest of ways, she was wrestling but she wasn't wrestling an opponent—some other fighter in Granger, South Bend or Iowa City. She was wrestling with a much more savvy, more cunning and more powerful opponent than this. Sarah Hildebrandt was wrestling with herself. She was struggling to decide whether or not she would take the risk of fulfilling her dream, the risk of admitting her dreams to herself and then, accepting the consequences, come what may...the risk of beginning a journey of a lifetime. And by this, she was deeply changed. She said,

I could feel it, you know? I could feel it in training. I could feel it in competition, even in my matches. I truly felt everything I was doing was leading me to where I wanted to go...and I'm doing it as the person I want to be. It wouldn't be the same to make this team and not have that.

I think learning that was huge and ultimately probably led to my success. This is something that I think I always wanted. I just didn't know how to make it so it was coming from me. It makes me emotional just to look back on that and know how long that took and how wrestling is mine. It's my journey. It's something that's truly coming from me.

It was the inner wrestling that led to her success, that allowed her to realize what she always wanted. It was amazing to Sarah Hildebrandt...how long the journey was, how long it took her to realize her dream, how long it took to make wrestling her own. It's my journey.

Give the good fight everything you have...because the spirit of the good fight will hold on fast. It's powerful and tight. The spirit of the good fight holds on to us and it will not let us go...until it blesses us with some measure of success...when we chose the good fight well. But, unfortunately, we don't always do that. We don't always choose the good fight well. Sometimes the bad fight chooses us...in fear and apprehension. So, it's tricky...because the good fight and the bad fight seem to choose us in similar ways. Both hold fast. Both are powerful and strong...but only one can bring us to tears in just 13 words, meaning only one kind of fight—the good kind of fight—feeds us spiritually. Only one of them comes with flowers...and with smiles that reach from ear to ear. Only one kind of fight—the good kind of fight—is beautiful in this way.

Michael

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I study old speeches sometime. I am a fan of rhetoric. I like the original definition of this word. The colloquial one, the one that we commonly use is actually the secondary definition. We commonly define rhetoric as

...language designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect on its audience, but often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content

We've come to believe that rhetorical language is empty...or is transactional...or manipulative. Commercial culture makes this so. Rhetoric seems akin to advertisement. Who studies old commercials and is moved to tears by them...other than the old Coke commercial that still just brings me to tears.

I'd like to teach to world to sing
in perfect harmony

That's beautiful. I wish that it wasn't attached to a global beverage conglomerate but it is. What can we do? I reclaim it when I can...because singing in harmony belongs to us.

The second definition is the one that really gets me. It states that rhetoric is ...the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the use of figures of speech and other compositional techniques.

Rhetoric can move us...when we allow it to...when it's spirit touches on a dream of ours.

I'll close with this. The American political landscape is pretty vulgar right now. A covenant has been broken. Part of the dream is dislocated and we are limping along, still fighting and not tending to the wound. We're good at fighting with one another but we're not wrestling with ourselves...canceling one another all the time. The idea from the Bible seems beyond us most of the time. "I will not let you go unless you bless me..." Do we believe that? Do we still cleave to it? Can we still? Is holding fast still possible? That depends on whether we choose to fight the good fight or the bad one. Which fight blesses us?

Years ago, a public leader talked about two different kinds of fights. He coupled these fights with political points of view but unimpressively, for both of

these perspectives reside within us. He said that the difference between the good fight and the bad fight...

...has always been measured in courage and confidence. [Some of us] believe that the wagon train will not make it to the frontier unless some of the old, some of the young, some of the weak are left behind by the side of the trail. "The strong" -- "The strong," they tell us, "will inherit the land." [Others of us] believe that we can make it all the way with the whole family intact, and we have more than once. Ever since Franklin Roosevelt lifted himself from his wheelchair to lift this nation from its knees -- wagon train after wagon train -- to new frontiers of education, housing, peace; the whole family aboard, constantly reaching out to extend and enlarge that family; lifting them up into the wagon on the way; blacks and Hispanics, and people of every ethnic group, and native Americans -- all those struggling to build their families and claim some small share of America. For nearly 50 years we carried them all to new levels of comfort, and security, and dignity, even affluence. And remember this, some of us in this room today are here only because this nation had that kind of confidence. And it would be wrong to forget that.

What kind of confidence do we need right now? What helps us to wrestle the inner angels and find peace?

I went walking yesterday, I was finding me a way to fly
For the wind to come my way, I'm busy thinking about...
"Well, maybe...if I try"
And so I hold out my hand

That's the key. Hold out the hand and hold fast. We have been dislocated—like Jacob's hip and Sarah's elbow. We have been painfully separated from who we were. We're sharper now—easier to anger and harder to console—and we're grieving in ways we may not understand but we hold fast to one another and we do not let each other go. "I will not let you go unless you bless me." These words are real, real enough to make good fighters cry, real enough to endure the winter and flower into spring.

As we turn to heal ourselves (unmasking and new face-to-face), may we be gentle enough—gentle enough with ourselves and one another—to emerge from this COVID wrestling match whole hearted and renewed...and may we begin the journey back into community with beauty and with grace. May we wrestle respectfully and bravely enough to offer flowers.

May it be so. Blessed Be and amen.