

For the love of suffering: The Athlete of God

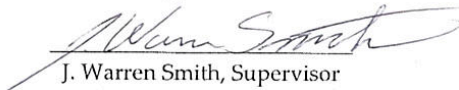
by

Mark Won

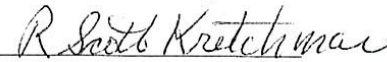
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the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This study takes an interdisciplinary approach to examine the relationship between sport and spiritual formation. By inviting to the conversation contributions from sociological research, personal narratives, biblical themes and philosophical arguments, it aims to examine how voluntary suffering in sport could provide a context conducive to spiritual growth. Rather than look at physical engagement in sport and spiritual formation as unrelated domains of pursuit, we will map the contours where the two converge and even stimulate one another. We will analyze courage as a unique quality fit for cultivation in suffering, and position it as an integral part of living out faith, hope and love. This study seeks to address the rigidity that is prevalent in the way Christians think of spirituality and deepen the conversation as it relates to formative frameworks in athletics.

Dedication

For Sarah. Thank you for your patience and prayers. Now it's your turn to write.

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1. Introduction

This study is the product of some essential evolutionary changes I have experienced, in more ways than one, while serving as a Navy Chaplain over the last eight years. This period of contextual ministry has effectively changed the language I commonly use to speak of the inner life and even the paradigm of ministry I bring to pastoral relationships. It will be apparent in the selection of my sources and narratives that I speak to an eclectic audience that is agnostic, spiritually hybrid and Christian of various types. This study is an attempt to bring an authentic application of my ministry concerns and articulate the issues discussed in a way that is relatable to the audience I interface with daily.

In Chapter 1, a brief history of my experience in the Navy as a chaplain serving in various environments is provided, along with a summary of significant transitional processes in how I fulfill my role as a multi-faceted religious figure in a warfighting culture. The section ends with a sketch of what my current operating ministry paradigm looks like.

In Chapter 2, the interaction between sport and various forms of spirituality and religion are examined. The practical impact of sport on political, social and economic change down to the metaphysical experiences of individual transcendence are considered to provide a colorful image of this important connection. Its aim is to augment the growing body of publications interested in a psychological interpretation of

the metaphysical considerations of sport, by infusing narratives that invoke spiritual words, ideas and connections. Christian narratives contribute to a conversation that is much broader and widely interconnected to other spiritual concepts. The section closes with a forward looking view of what body-spirit unity could look like through love and suffering.

In Chapter 3, we explore the dynamics of suffering from various perspectives. Rather than try to define what it is or why we suffer, the chapter focuses on how we can bring meaning into suffering and presents suffering in sport as an opportunity to leverage personal spiritual growth. Finally, the chapter highlights the uniqueness of voluntary suffering as a potentially transformative process that resembles other significant contexts of suffering such a disease, captivity, and military training.

In Chapter 4, we connect suffering and courage, and underscore courage as the notable quality that suffering provides the context for expression. It looks at the biblical centrality of courage and its translatable quality from one domain of exercise to another. Lastly, it situates courage as a critical energizer of faith, hope and love, the three “noble truths” laid out by the Apostle Paul.

Chapter 5 is where the major themes in the study are personified in the person, the athlete of God. This archetype is fleshed out with contemporary examples of faith-based athletes and organizations who put stock in grit, suffering, exertion, and apply such values to practical spirituality. Additionally, a background to the connection

between sport and the military is provided to serve as a context for a section on military ministry outlooks and opportunities.

We conclude the study in Chapter 6, with a summary of key touch-points that have implications and relevance for ministry and in the life of Christians in America. The chapter ends with recommendations for further study.

1.1 Becoming a Chaplain

In what were highly diverse contexts, my philosophy of ministry and pastoral toolkit underwent some serious renovation. This introduction provides a basic summary of what military Chaplains do and what is expected of them, and the development of a philosophy of ministry for holistic care in the military that I arrived at in the process. This section will elucidate some of the major themes found in this study and provide a helpful roadmap for the chapters ahead.

To be effective in executing the United States Navy Chaplain Corps' (CHC) four functions (Provide, Care, Facilitate, and Advise), each Chaplain must find ways to be true to the tenets of their faith tradition while engaging with both compassion and professionalism, those of all backgrounds. Provision, includes the basic religious duties military Chaplains offer, such as leading worship services, bible studies, leading weddings, funerals, baptisms, and so forth. Functions that one would typically see a local church pastor conduct. Caring, refers to the relationships we build with people within the organization and includes counseling, mentoring, morale and welfare

programs and initiatives. Facilitate, is the support we provide for those of other faith groups. This work can come in the form of making available spaces for worship, supplies and materials, and connecting the servicemember(s) with either a Chaplain or religious representative from the requested faith group to address a particular need. For example, while I was the Chaplain on the USS Peleliu (LHA-5) during an eight-month deployment, we trained Jewish, Muslim and Mormon lay leaders and provided a worship room where they could gather, thereby facilitating the exercise of their religious freedoms. As Advisors, Chaplains are special staff to the Commanding Officer and offer input on trends and special needs related to the morale and welfare of the community. The demand for the four functions vary dramatically depending on the type of Command one is assigned to. A chapel assignment is typically Provision heavy; while in Operational settings, or Commands that deploy, Care may be the primary task. Hence, my focus of effort is largely shaped by the mission, the culture and the “battle rhythm” of the Command I am attached to. My previous duty assignments on a Navy ship during an eight-month deployment, the substance abuse and trauma clinic at a military hospital, with the Marines, and with members of Naval Special Warfare, all required unique pastoral solutions.

1.2 From preaching to presence

My initial journey of going from preaching at least twice a week for nearly seven years to once every few years, was filled with depression and self-doubt. In my local

church pastor period, preaching was not simply an activity but a lifestyle. The text(s) for the week would shape what I read, watched and the conversations and prayers I expressed from Monday to Wednesday and Sunday morning. It was a process of self-nourishment as much as a way to feed God's people.

Such was the case until I checked into the US Naval warship, the USS Peleliu in November 2011. There I was met by my supervisor, a Catholic priest Navy Chaplain whose highest priority for me was that I go around and visit Sailors door-to-door. As a natural introvert, the thought of making cold calls with no justification other than that I am the new guy, was daunting. I was not their pastor nor their friend. Other than awkward small talk, I really had no "why" to enter their work spaces. It often felt like social roulette. The responses and the length of our interaction varied from space to space. In about six months, I got around enough to know a good percentage of the crew of nearly 1000 Sailors on board. It was not until I had finished my two years on the USS Peleliu and settled into my next Command, Fort Belvoir Community Hospital as a staff Chaplain that I began to metamorphize from a pastor to a chaplain.

1.3 Resilience and spirituality: keeping up with young warriors

My hospital ministry in the Substance Abuse clinic along with a full year of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), provided the ideal mix of clinical training and enough reflection and processing to stimulate an articulation of what was the emergence of a pastoral theology of chaplaincy. As experienced ordained clergy, we are told in the

Navy that our focus mainly needs to be on learning the military and assimilating our civilian skills to the warfighter. My personal journey through confusion, doubt, and conflict, confirmed that what I was told was a gross oversimplification of a complex process. While I can't claim that every Navy Chaplain experiences the same type of journey, mine entailed routine visits to very foreign and vulnerable places of service.

1.2.1 Learning Spirituality

The first defining experience came in the form of a new position at the hospital, as the Chaplain of the Substance abuse and Trauma clinic. Soon after my appointment, in addition to the usual Care and Provision ministry hospital chaplains offered, I was asked to lead the 12-Steps program and begin a Spirituality group as well. The problem is that I've never considered, at least seriously, the concept of spirituality apart from the Christian faith. I saw the challenge as an opportunity to educate myself and deepen the impact I could have on the patients. Hence, I decided to write to my supervisor, what we call in the Navy a point paper, on what chaplains do in spirituality groups.

I brought in Paul Tillich, Rollo May, and Zen literature as partners to develop a curriculum that guided patients into the exploration of fears, hopes, loves, in the form of storytelling through words, images, and ideas in a small group setting. What I discovered with my many combat-torn veterans was a disturbing disconnect from their emotions as well as a cynical imagination. It was very natural for them to think or perceive the worst in a situation or person, but extremely difficult to utilize the same

imagination to believe, hope and love. Often times, the pain associated with the wounds they carried bled into everything else. My program's aim was to guide the patients toward experiences of forgiveness, rediscovery, ownership, and ultimately hope. If they could hope in anything, it was possible that they could hope even in God. That was my premise. While the program was inclusive and pluralistic, it was not entirely secular. The group was encouraged to explore the religious contours of their past. And more often than not, some form of religious narrative was shared, both hurtful and sentimental. As we shall see in chapter 5, my approach in ministry to sport and spirituality shares much overlap with the work I did with this group at the clinic.

The experience taught me that using spirituality as the overarching category of discussion allowed for more diverse conversations in the group, and brought in those who would have clearly turned away or shut down if the group was explicitly Christian. At least half, if not more, of my military patients had a very complicated past with religion. Many had exposure to Christianity, but have since acquired a more blended view of ultimate things. I focused my role on being more of a coach, or the Socratic "mid-wife", rather than a pastor whose role is to nurture and care for people he or she is generally in a long term relationship with.

Using the language of spirituality opened the door of engagement with servicemembers in ways critical for chaplain work. The significance of this development in my philosophy of ministry shapes the approach I take in this research. I am in

essence, creating a three-way conversation by including spirituality with sport and religion. My intentional blurring of this line resembles the dynamic present in the military, where religion, sport and spirituality effect each other dynamically without clear boundaries.

1.2.2 Learning physical fitness

Other than recreational basketball and football games with some of the youth at my church, the pressure to push myself physically was totally absent in my time as a pastor. My anxiety level crawled each day, as I prepared to transition from the hospital to my next assignment with the United States Marine Corps (USMC). Having been told about the fitness and suffering obsessed USMC culture, I did my best to prepare mentally and physically for the challenges that awaited me.

Regardless of whether a chaplain is fitness oriented or not, a basic level of engagement in physical activity with the service members is essential for getting visibility (nothing is more frowned upon than a chaplain who hibernates in the office) among the Marines. Rarely does a chaplain get “business” by being private. Our services are technically optional, and no one is necessarily required to meet with the chaplain. It is by joining them on arduous hikes, living and working with them during lengthy deployments, and participating in other training events that we build credibility and earn trust with those we seek to minister to.

To stimulate the transition, I decided to become a serious cyclist and runner. That is, I've been a casual version of both but never truly pushed myself to break into new levels of performance. What was initially a means to an end—fitness for the sake of ministry—became a life-changing experience.

Until I was repeatedly pushed to the edge of what I believed were my physical limitations, I didn't realize that the actual barriers were not physical but mental, and even spiritual. The myriad of physical challenges I encountered while being with my Marines showed me just how much I was secretly pampering a notion of "comfort at all costs" attitude in the dark corners of my mind. The discovery led to an exploration into the spiritual implications of such habits that I had long harbored. Much of what I personally discovered finds resonance with the stories and research to follow. In pushing my body, I grazed the borders of my mind and began to explore the contours of my spiritual life with renewed vigor. It was a formative period of crystalizing a holistic perspective of the self, and subsequently the work of a chaplain.

1.4 Whole person care

When caring for the members of my parish, I routinely considered where an individual would be situated in a spiritual growth continuum. Like a parent that is aware of the different health and wellness indicators of their child, so I held a long term view of the people I pastored. It was a vision that culminated in guiding them to an engaged and willful commitment to following Jesus. The transient nature of military

ministry demands that I focus on the short term opportunities I have with servicemembers at each duty station. There are very few constants in our community, since we are uprooted every two to three years throughout the world. Military ministry is more akin to running a kiosk in a shopping mall, if the church could be compared to a retail shop. In the grand scheme of Kingdom work, my office is never the destination but resembles more of a help-desk or a service station. My work with servicemembers may have long-term implications on their lives but it is still focused more on triaging and immediate needs care.

Having learned the centrality of a ministry of presence, the interconnectedness of personal spiritual narratives and the relational opportunities that physical fitness provided, I began to form a model of care suitable for military chaplaincy. It was holistic, and considered all aspects of individual (family) wellness. From this experience of providing holistic care, I acquired a keen interest in the relationship between the training of the body and its antecedents to the spiritual life. While the subject is filled with subjectivity, there remains an untapped wealth of insight into how physical training could be more effectively utilized to shape the whole person beyond fitness and mental toughness, to spiritual discovery. The exploration of this potential as found in the relationship between sport and spirituality, is the point of departure for this study.

2. Christ and Sport

In general, this is a study about the highly neglected relationship we have with our bodies. Much could be said about the history of human conflict with our own mind, body and spirit, including the categories themselves. This much seems clear: we have a body made up of various parts as well as something we would describe as a soul or spirit. At least that would be the perspective for many followers of Jesus. The fact that he himself is presented as a mysterious union of Divine Word and flesh, not to mention his resurrected body, adds to the confusion and debate on the subject (Matt 1:23; Jn 20:26).

As Christians, we must wrestle with this tension between the ethereal qualities of the spirit, with its invisible and yet intuitively sensed reality, against the backdrop of a concrete material home we call the body. A robust understanding of this relationship negates the Gnostic dismissal of the body. When it comes to the body, does form follow function or is it the opposite? Is it possible to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your *strength*” (Mark 12:30, italics mine) while maintaining an obese body weight with little to no consideration for diet or fitness?

Sport is one of the most engaging and rewarding activities we can do with our bodies. In this chapter, we survey the numerous ways in which sport, spirituality and religion interact and inform each other as well as some of the unique qualities of sport that distinguishes it from more isolating, more cognition-centered activities.

2.1 The body matters

According to Yuval Noah Harari, in his book *Homo Deus*, more than half the world will be obese by the year 2030.¹ We are, for the first time in history, living in a world where more people will die of overeating than hunger.² In such a time as this, it is reasonable to say that how Christians think of food, exercise, rest, and the body, carries significant implications for spiritual health.

This is a study in the relationship between spiritual formation and on one of the most popular activities human beings engage with their bodies, sports. The sheer influence of sport over culture, politics, economy, and even individual identity, demands a serious look at how it is shaping other areas of life previously considered unrelated, namely, spirituality. Mark Nesti is one among a growing number of scholars exploring this intersection. He conducted 8 years of sport psychology work with Premiership soccer players from five clubs, with more than 2,000 hours of applied practice, and approached anxiety and courage from an existential perspective to show the importance of spirituality in soccer and other sports.³

¹ Yuval N. Harari and Derek Perkins, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow.*, Unabridged. (New York: HarperAudio, 2017).

² Harari and Perkins.

³ Mark Nesti, S. J. (S Jim) Parry, and Nick Watson, *Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sports* (New York: Routledge, 2011). 150.

2.2 It's more than a game

Sport is a cultural tour de force that deserves the serious attention of Christians of all ranks. It also has the potential to be an embodied metaphor of high spiritual value. Like Jesus' agricultural allusions, sport enjoys a broad resonance with people of all types. Just like farming was the milieu Jesus lived in, sport is a central part of ours today. In a study that spans 14 years more than 50 percent of Americans, to as high as 66 percent, have identified themselves as sports fans from 2001 to 2015.⁴ In his seminal work on religion in sport, Frank Deford wrote in *Sports Illustrated*, "The claim that sport has developed into a national faith may be linked to the nagging awareness that something has happened to Sunday."⁵ Though its ratings reached an all-time low in 2018, the Super bowl still managed to draw 103.4 million viewers.⁶ The Japanese battle cry in World War II aimed at demoralizing the American soldiers was, "To hell with Babe Ruth!"⁷ They clearly had some insight into what Americans valued.

⁴ Gallup Inc., "As Industry Grows, Percentage of U.S. Sports Fans Steady." Gallup.com. Accessed March 29, 2018. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/183689/industry-grows-percentage-sports-fans-steady.aspx>.

⁵ Charles S. Prebish, *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1992). 45.

⁶ CBS/AP February 5, 2018, and 5:20 Pm, "Super Bowl LII: Ratings for Football's Biggest Game Lowest since 2009," accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/super-bowl-lii-tv-ratings/>.

⁷ Prebish, *Religion and Sport*.

When religious and political diplomacy struggles to make progress in this era of complex geopolitical tensions, sport possesses the unusual power to bring down barriers and foster social cohesion. What political discussion could not accomplish sport achieved for South and North Korea in the 2018 Winter Olympics, when the two nations marched together and joined forces to compete as one women’s ice hockey team.⁸ At the second International Forum on Sport for Peace and Development, representatives from national governments, the UN and other stakeholders gathered to review and strategize ways to leverage the “potential of sport as a humanitarian, social and reconciliation tool.”⁹

Such social change opportunities through sport are possible because something deeply human and intuitive is expressed in sporting activities. Commenting on the Apostle Paul’s words, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it!” (1 Cor 9:24) in what may be his most significant statement on the Christian mission within the field of sport, Pope John Paul II observed, “...in recent years it [sport] has continued to grow even more as one of the characteristic phenomena of the modern era, almost a sign of the times capable of interpreting humanity’s new needs and new expectations. Sports have spread to every

⁸ Choe Sang-Hun, “North and South Korean Teams to March as One at Olympics,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2018, sec. Asia Pacific.

⁹ “Sport: A Catalyst for Development and Peace,” accessed March 29, 2018, https://www.un-ngls.org/index.php/un-ngls_news_archives/2011/666-sport-a-catalyst-for-development-and-peace.

corner of the world, transcending differences between cultures and nations.”¹⁰ The force of his description rivals the kind of language a church historian might use to describe the dissemination of the Gospel in Rome.

Shortly after Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as president of the newly democratic South Africa, a writer described the national euphoria he witnessed when the South African rugby team defeated their arch-rivals the New Zealand All-Blacks in the final as equal to the inauguration itself. Mandela led the celebration by visiting with the team and even wearing the jersey of one of their stars. “Sport, one of the most spontaneous activities of human beings, was seen as symbolic of both the need for and possibility of transformation...there was a sense in the country that sport was no longer a force for division but rather a factor in unification.”¹¹ At their purest form, both Christianity and sport have to their credit an extensive history of empowering individuals and communities to overcome insurmountable social barriers as well as infuse a sense of purpose to those without social status.

2.2.1. Finding meaning in sport

In NBC’s television coverage of the 2017 Ironman championship, a grueling triathlon where both pro and age-group participants compete in a 2.4 mile open water

¹⁰ Kevin Lixey, *Sport and Christianity : A Sign of the Times in the Light of Faith*, Wissenschaftliches Symposium “Zur Christlichen Sicht Des Sports” (2007: Akademie Des Bistums (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012). 3.

¹¹ Kevin O’Gorman, *Saving Sport : Sport, Society and Spirituality* (Blackrock, Co Dublin: Columba Press, 2010).

swim, a 112 mile bike ride across the Hawaiian lava desert, and a 26.2 mile marathon run, the commentator described the athletes and the event as “an intricate process of finding peace through pain.”¹² Mike Ergo, a United States Marine Corps veteran also competing in the age category told one interviewer, “I think endurance sports is almost the perfect prescription for PTSD. Being able to put your body through stress, and overcoming that, allowing yourself to be there and letting that anxiety and stress fade away actually builds resilience”¹³ Having lost 29 of his fellow Marines in battle, Ergo wore their names on his back through the 140.6 mile journey. When he finally reached the run portion, he recalls the memory of a fellow runner and her story, “She told me about how she was running this race to deal with the pain of her husband leaving her. Definitely no shortage of inspiration at this race.”

Just as Ergo and his running companion sought resolution to their real world problems in a sport, cardiologist and best-selling author of the book, *Running and Being*, George Sheehan, considered the marathon a moral equivalent to war, providing a “theatre of heroism, an arena where one could demonstrate courage and fortitude, a setting where one could be the best one would ever be.”¹⁴ For these volunteer athletes,

¹² “YouTube,” accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoUg7pJe-fc>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ George Sheehan and Kenny Moore, *Running & Being: The Total Experience*, Kindle Edition (Rodale, 2014). 19.

who were neither paid nor contracted to perform in such events, the sport was an arena where they could wage war with the most formidable foe one can face, the self. For Ergo and countless others, the journey to training and finishing the Ironman was a way to face a tender part of their emotional histories through physical testing. Olympic runner and journalist, Kenny Moore, remembers how Sheehan described the suffering of the marathon like the “Stations of the Cross,” “The pain was ‘penance’ and the race ‘a purgatory of mile on mile and then at the finish the peace beyond understanding. A time when even death becomes acceptable.’”¹⁵ Sheehan was not the first nor the last to infuse spiritual meaning to a sporting event.

The Greeks believed that glory, and even immortality, were bound to one’s actions in competition. It was believed that through fearless acts of valor these athletes could transcend human existence and “pass into the realm of the contended.” Hannah Arendt’s definition of this idea is useful, “Through undying actions which leave unfading traces in the world as far as humankind stretches, mortals can attain a kind of human immortality of their own and thus prove that they are also of divine nature.”¹⁶ We find the development of such perceptions in Plato who encouraged the training and education of the body through gymnastics in close connection with the formation of

¹⁵ Sheehan and Moore.

¹⁶ Lixey, *Sport and Christianity*.

reason (the soul).¹⁷ However, because of Plato's elevation of the soul above the body, according to Karen Joisten, a "contempt of the body" mindset emerges and eventually shapes the most dominant Christian position.¹⁸ It may help to explain why Christianity has had such an awkward history with sport.

2.3 Religion and sport as cultural kin

An examination of the many striking parallels sport shares with religion, in general, is a good starting point. A pioneering figure in the field of sport and philosophy, Michael Novak observed, "Going to a stadium is half like going to a political rally, half like going to church. Even today, the Olympics are constructed around high ceremonies, rituals, and symbols. The Olympics are not barebones athletic events, but religion and politics as well."¹⁹ According to French sociologist Emile Durkheim, "religion is the tie that binds a collectivity together—it transforms the objects and activities of everyday life into the sacred. Planned gatherings paradoxically generate spontaneous expressions of group enthusiasm, even hysteria that bind the individual with the assembly."²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports : End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). 19.

²⁰ Brad Schultz and Mary Lou Sheffer, *Sport and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016). 1.

The blurred lines between sports and religion and the pervasive influence of sports in contemporary culture has led some to see it as a competing religion.²¹ While acknowledging the complex overlap in religious and sport experiences, Sheffer suggests that the question is not so much “‘Will religion survive?’ but rather ‘What will it look like in the emerging 21st century?’”²² Rather than see sport and religion in opposition, philosophers Jeffery Scholes and Raphael Sassower argue, by analyzing those junctures where sports and religion overlap or where they share a similar vocabulary, even though the means of expression may differ greatly, a fuller understanding of the current-day relationship emerges. We base our contention on the mounting evidence that the sacred and secular do not operate in two separate domains in the twenty-first century culture and then apply this insight to religion and sports.”²³

This recognition of the existing overlap and continuities led several notable philosophers to come together in a groundbreaking work to examine this dynamic relationship between sports and spirituality from the vantage point of religion, existential psychology and ethics. The multi-faceted study makes a strong case that “the

²¹ Carter, “God Does Not Play Dice with the Universe, or Does He?” 145-146.

²² Schultz and Sheffer, *Sport and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. 5.

²³ Jeffrey Scholes and Raphael Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014). 12.

real exploration of spirituality in sport is in the reflection, the dialogue, and the practice.”²⁴ That is, as a phenomenological domain of inquiry embedded in experience, the relationship cannot be adequately analyzed conceptually from a desk. The essay suggests an open and dialogical approach to the study with a serious consideration of the actual activity of sport.

This is a notable departure from the more traditional theological examinations of sport as exemplified in Robert Ellis’ work, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, where he makes an explicit attempt to lay out a theology of sport using conventional categories associated with historic Christianity.²⁵ He looks for common ground and ways to weave in theological themes in sport by using it as background to the theological discussion in the foreground. This kind of theological “colonization” of sport can undermine the very essence of sport and its conduciveness to growth and spontaneity.

Scholes and Sassower suggests that we avoid thinking of sports and religion as competitors jockeying for greater social influence and examine the relationship culturally. They see sports and religion complimenting one another, since “sport is religious in some sense and that knowledge of religion is helpful in explaining tragedies

²⁴ S. J. (S Jim) Parry, *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007).

²⁵ Robert (Robert Anthony) Ellis, *The Games People Play : Theology, Religion, and Sport* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

and triumphs that occur in sports on a regular basis. Likewise, religion is an athletic activity in some sense, and knowledge of sport is helpful in explaining tragedies and triumphs in one's religious life."²⁶ Essentially, they are arguing that the stories crossover and inform each other to give greater depth and autobiographical meaning to the activities. In this vein, John Sexton argues "that baseball—with its blessings and curses, saints and sinners, miracles, faith, and doubt—can be a way of getting at the "ineffable" part of existence that religious believers might characterize as God."²⁷ A recent study of spiritual experiences among recreational endurance runners found,

"...concentrating on the individual meaning and the athletes' lived experience it is possible to generate data ...' related to 'the overall development and spiritual growth of the person'. From our two consecutive years of data collection, findings indicate that participants experienced genuine inward reflections and external metaphysical experiences, suggesting deeper level cognitive connections to themselves and external realities (nature, relationships, God, etc.)."²⁸

As a catalyst to this unique inward and external experience, sport creates conditions that are uniquely suitable for spiritual examination and growth.

During a distance running award speech, Sheehan exhorted his fellow runners with these words, "The talk was more than a talk. It was a love affair. I spoke to each face in turn. And saw in each reflection of my feeling for them. I told them of the beauties of our bodies, and how we needed play. I told them we were all to be heroes in

²⁶ Scholes and Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture*. 22.

²⁷ Justine Greve, "Jesus Didn't Tap: Masculinity, Theology, and Ideology in Christian Mixed Martial Arts," *Religion and American Culture* 24, no. 2 (2014): 141–85, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2014.24.2.141>. 144.

²⁸ Parry, *Sport and Spirituality*.

some way and if we were heroic enough we would see God.”²⁹

It is not uncommon to hear very explicit language of praise, gratitude, and worship from the once obese guests on the reality show, “America’s Biggest Loser,” as they overcome life-threatening weight issues through challenging workouts and diet modifications helped by a physical trainer. Some of them often speak of the physical trainer as being an “angel” or sent by God as a helper. One contestant, Roberto, was emotional when he shared, “God has sent us little hints throughout the whole journey and I believed it . . . It’s exciting and we’re thrilled and we can’t wait to start this new healthy life.”³⁰ This anecdotal cultural reference captures this powerful crossover of stories that religion and sports regularly exhibits. Hence, there is significant value in remaining open to the questions generated from a dialogical exploration of both categories.³¹

While there is plenty of work being done studying spirituality in sports and beyond, these works are typically concerned with spirituality, in a broader sense.³²

Many examine sport from philosophical, ethical and social perspectives without making

²⁹ Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*. 253.

³⁰ “‘The Biggest Loser’ Winner Reacts After Shocking Finale Twist,” accessed April 12, 2018, <https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/the-biggest-loser-winner-reacts-after-shocking-finale-twist-w165087/>.

³¹ Wissenschaftliches Symposium “Zur christlichen Sicht des Sports” (2007 : Akademie des Bistums Mainz) and Kevin Lixey, *Sport and Christianity : A Sign of the Times in the Light of Faith* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

³² Parry, *Sport and Spirituality*. 5.

explicit allusions to religious traditions. Building on Scholes' and Sassower's idea that the sacred and secular do not operate in separate domains, this study aims to sketch several complimentary touchpoints in this relationship in order to better understand how they can inform each other and articulate new ways of framing the practice of sport as a legitimate discipline with spiritual goals.

2.3 An awkward history

Although the Apostle Paul understood the metaphorical value of sport when he cited the Olympic games in 1 Corinthians, Christians have historically polarized themselves in one of two extremes. On the one hand, there is a historical endorsement of sport as a worthy practice beneficial for cultivating Christian virtues such as self-discipline and self-control.³³ The rise and influence of the YMCA and Muscular Christianity paved the way to the use of sports as a ministry tool and the birth of missionary organizations such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA).³⁴ On the other hand, critics such as William Baker in *Playing God* and Tony Ladd and James Mathisen in *Muscular Christianity* argue that this marriage of sports and Christianity has birthed a "folk theology" consisting of locker room talks with some Jesus thrown in.³⁵

³³ Greve, "Jesus Didn't Tap."

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 142.

Brad Schultz's sees sport as needing redemption. Sport is a threat because it is more popular, and Christianity has not influenced it; rather it has been the other way around. He suggests, "If religion was using sport to engage in a battle for the hearts and minds of people, that battle has been lost...As a result, instead of not being conformed to the world as Paul warned in his book of Romans, religion is conforming to sport, if not giving itself over wholeheartedly."³⁶ Much of the tension lies in a binary debate on the kind of relationship sports and Christianity ought to have. It actually is an opportunity to enrich the conversation, if we frame the issue of sports and Christianity more from the vantage point of shared affinities and the way they can potentially catalyze one another.

Going beyond religion *against* sports and religion *for* sports, this study will examine both as participants in the "web of interrelated cultural forms."³⁷ The value of this approach is found in its inherent openness to discovery. With culture as the overarching domain of inquiry, the need to draw the line in the sand between secular and sacred language and space disappears. This opens the way for exploring Christian spiritual formation and sports from a metaphorical perspective that is also grounded in embodied practice and prevents the compartmentalization of the two.³⁸

When German philosopher Eugen Herrigel went to Japan to study Zen, he was

³⁶ Schultz and Sheffer, *Sport and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. 90.

³⁷ Scholes and Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture*. 5.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

enrolled in Archery for six years.³⁹ The memoir of his experience was published in his book, *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Describing the significance behind a sacred Archery ritual called, yawatashi, Einat Bar-On Cohen writes, “Japanese religions are not situated on a meta-level in relation to practice; rather, like martial arts, they come to be through practice alone, and thus...practice and habitus become inseparable through it.”⁴⁰ While this harmonic and singular view of the body and spirit is not common in the West, Paul’s use of the metaphor “temple” (1 Cor 6:19) when referring to the body as the sacred dwelling place of the Holy Spirit is symbolically rich, and resembles the Zen Archer’s experience. The question begs asking: “which is the metaphor? The body or the temple? Regardless of how we may come to understand this mysterious relationship, it is clear that the two are inextricably tied.

What we do with the body influences the spirit just as much as our beliefs, hopes and fears will shape what we do with our bodies. Ancient practices such as fasting, pilgrimages to holy sites, the use of sackcloth and ashes, genuflecting, and others like it, promote body and spirit engagement in what are spiritually oriented activities.⁴¹ The mystic baker, Brother Lawrence, in his classic *Practicing the Presence of God*, ironically

³⁹ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

⁴⁰ Dale C. Spencer and Raúl Sánchez García, *Fighting Scholars : Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports* (London: Anthem Press, 2013). 142.

⁴¹ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline : The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Rev. 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

points out that he often felt closer to God when he was going about his daily activities in the kitchen than when he was intentionally in formal prayer.⁴² While there is much value in the spiritual traditions we have inherited over the years, we will be unable to harness them for spiritual progress unless we become more fluent in the language of the body and physical activity. As Shirl James Hoffman notes, “The saddest consequence of the Christian community’s not having thought carefully about sports may be that they have missed out on the true riches that sports have to offer.”⁴³ Novak takes it further and argues the essential qualities of sports, “The basic reality of all human life is play, games, sport; these are the realities from which the basic metaphors for all that is important in the rest of life are drawn.”⁴⁴

Although widely neglected by Christian intellectuals, this has not inhibited pew Christians from forming beliefs and notions about the relationship between the two. In the true to life film, *Chariots of Fire*, the pastor and missionary Eric Liddell responds to a question about why he is running in the Olympics by saying, “God made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure.”⁴⁵ More recently, Tim Tebow, former quarterback of the

⁴² Brother Lawrence and of the Resurrection Lawrence, *Practice of the Presence of God [Electronic Resource]* ([S.l.]: Project Gutenberg, 2004).

⁴³ Shirl J. Hoffman, *Good Game : Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010).

⁴⁴ Novak, *The Joy of Sports*.

⁴⁵ Hugh Hudson, *Chariots of Fire*, Biography, Drama, History, (1982).

Denver Broncos, was made famous by attributing his touchdowns to God by celebrating each score with one knee on the turf in a posture of reverence. Athletes of all kinds today have rituals, tattoos, and even relics that they use to evoke spiritual meaning into the practice of their chosen sport. But what they lack is a deeper understanding of this body and spirit, sport and faith relationship and how they could engage it profitably as Christians. According to Deford, this lack of thoughtful Christian reflection on sports has led to the rise of “Sportianity” — a concoction of triumphal evangelism blended with worldly Darwinian competition, and crafted to appeal to those for whom a love of athletics frames their lives.”⁴⁶ Hoffman frames the problem this way, “...having launched a rudderless boat into the rolling waters of popular sport, they are adrift, possessing neither a clear sense of what they want out of their sport experiences nor a coherent philosophy to guide them in achieving it.”⁴⁷ In order to move beyond the historic tensions between Christ and sport and their binary relationship, we need to begin to address the classic problem of dualism.

2.2 Body spirit challenges

In critically addressing the elevation of the mind as central to modern day life, Thomas Merton wrote that the beginning of freedom “is not liberation from the body but liberation from the mind. We are not entangled in our own body, we are entangled

⁴⁶ Hoffman, *Good Game*. 14.

⁴⁷ Hoffman. 21.

in our mind.”⁴⁸ The priorities that Christian communities place on the mind in relation to spiritual growth is most obvious in the way we train our leaders. While this is a wider problem with higher education in general⁴⁹, its influence on clergy poses a greater threat since the bias for the “spiritual” over the physical is more common among those who are training to care for and potentially “save” souls. Ironically, even students of kinesiology lack exposure to the more directly physical element of learning.⁵⁰

A quick look at the various seminary websites and their program outlines for the Master of Divinity degree will show that the bulk of seminary education across denominations largely consists of classroom time preoccupied with reading and writing. While some include requirements for internships, Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) or other practical projects, such things are add-ons to the mostly academic requirements. These things are all profitable and necessary, but we are not nearly as aware as we could be in considering the spiritually formative potential of the body. Our understanding of Paul’s admonition for believers to be renewed in their mind (Rom 12:2) needs to be fine-

⁴⁸ Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*. 223.

⁴⁹ Tyler G. Johnson and Gregg Twietmeyer, “The Necessity of Physical Activity in Kinesiology Degree Programs,” *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 89, no. 2 (February 12, 2018): 42–48.

⁵⁰ Johnson and Twietmeyer.

tuned with a nuanced philosophical understanding of human anthropology to include how the renewal involves the body, desires, cultural context, the emotions, etc.⁵¹

2.2.1 The limitations of reason

In the absence of such articulation, the typical spiritual formation program will emphasize biblical knowledge and Christian ethics. Writing on the emergence of the use of the phrase “spiritual formation” among Protestants, Dallas Willard laments the dependence on instruction as the primary means of training Christians: “We have counted on preaching, teaching, and knowledge or information to form faith in the hearer, and have counted on faith to form the inner life and outward behavior of the Christian.”⁵² On the ethical side, Willard argues that formation has pushed conformity to rules more than actual character formation. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, he commented, “What sometimes goes on in all sorts of Christian institutions is not formation of people in the character of Christ; it's teaching of outward conformity. You don't get in trouble for not having the character of Christ, but you do if you don't obey the laws.”⁵³ Willard's critique of Protestant methods of training Christians cuts to the heart of the problem—the didactic reason-based methods have shown to be utterly

⁵¹ Steve L. Porter, “Philosophy and Spiritual Formation: A Call to Philosophy and Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, September 22, 2014.

⁵² Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What It Is and How It Might Be Done,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology; La Mirada* 28, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 254.

⁵³ Agnieszka Tennant, “The Making of the Christian: Richard J. Foster and Dallas Willard on the Difference between Discipleship and Spiritual Formation.” (*Christianity Today*, October 2005).

inadequate in transforming people at a deeper level. The demand signal for a more holistic approach is blaring.

2.2.2 The person as a multisensory whole

To say that a human being is equally a body and spirit, is nothing new. Christian thinkers as early as the first centuries held such positions.⁵⁴ Indeed, our interest is more in uncovering what may have been overlooked and invigorating a renewed understanding of a mind, body and spirit relationship. What we are aiming to address is the slow and gradual disruption of this equilibrium. To this end, Greg Twietmeyer's description of a human being is a useful starting point for understanding the person more holistically:

“Eating, sleeping, thinking, perceiving, and moving are all functions of the human being-at-work and are not reducible to either mere intellectual or mere biological processes. A corpse is no longer engaged in any of these processes and is, therefore, a body only in the qualified sense of being a dead body. It no longer has being, because ‘its being was its life.’ It is this process of human being that expresses the intimate union of soul and body in a person.”⁵⁵

Twietmeyer's argument challenges the notion of elevating certain functions of the body over others as well as interpreting the person with a certain bias in what characterizes a life. He reminds us that the most mundane activities are just as significant in constituting what a human being is.

⁵⁴ Lixey, *Sport and Christianity*.

⁵⁵ Gregg Twietmeyer, “A Theology of Inferiority: Is Christianity the Source of Kinesiology's Second-Class Status in the Academy?,” *Quest* (00336297) 60, no. 4 (November 2008): 452–66.

As those who assume the union of body and spirit, the Wiconi International Native dancers describe their dances as “prayer made visible.” Richard Twiss describes the power of this practice: “On more than one occasion we were deeply touched and wept openly when the Holy Spirit visited us as different nations offered their traditional songs and dances of praise in honor of Jesus Christ. For some of the delegations, even after decades of serving the Lord, this was the first time they felt free to use their tribal songs and dances for worship.”⁵⁶ The Wiconi example comes to us as an exotic novelty rather than a normative expression of holistic worship. It is because moving beyond established ideas of prayer and dance or body and spirit, requires some breaking of a collective cultural presupposition that often escapes consciousness. Regardless of how compartmentalized our language and way of life may be, the “disconnectedness goes against our own experience, since we ordinarily experience ourselves as one human being.”⁵⁷

2.2.3 Love as the unifier

There are experiences in life that cannot be fully known or appreciated unless the entire person is experiencing it. Food is one of these things. A critical review of a dish, no matter how well written, could never convey to another person’s palate and

⁵⁶ W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship : Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017).186

⁵⁷ Irena Martínková, “Body Ecology: Avoiding Body–Mind Dualism,” *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 101–12. 105

imagination what it actually tastes like. In actually experiencing the dish in person we undergo a multisensory stimulation of sight, smell, texture, and flavor along with a stream of feelings and thoughts that can access an elaborate web of associated memories. It is one of the unifying activities in life that captures the richness of experience made possible through holistic encounter, much like love and suffering.

Pope Benedict XVI addressed this phenomenon in his first encyclical, *Deus*

Caritas Est:

Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united; the challenge of eros can be said to be truly overcome when this unification is achieved. Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness. The Epicure Gassendi used to offer Descartes the humorous greeting: 'O Soul!' And Descartes would reply: 'O Flesh!' Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love—eros—able to mature and attain authentic grandeur."⁵⁸

For Pope Benedict, the eros problem exists in the tension caused by the spirit's desire for unification without a consideration of the body's inclination towards eros.⁵⁹ This conflicting energy propels a person towards what is his or her goal and vocation in life: love. It is love that unifies and opens the way to the unveiling of the mystery of the human person.⁶⁰ In *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II argued, "Man cannot live

⁵⁸ Lixey, *Sport and Christianity*. 40.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Lixey, *Sport and Christianity*. 41

without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible to himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”⁶¹

Both Popes envisage an active love that is expressed by the whole person. So compelling its force and vast its depth, that agape has the potential to unifying what is historically conflicted within the person. This unifying quality is something rarely shared by other experiences under the Sun, with the exception of suffering.

3. Suffering

In this section we will examine suffering primarily from a phenomenological standpoint. The purpose is to sketch what could be described as the dynamics of suffering. It is not a theology but an exploration and inquiry into how suffering in general, informs, and relates to voluntary suffering in sport. Additional insights draw upon a mosaic of narratives from the military, religion, and sport. It is a survey of what suffering means for some and a sketch of what it *could* be when engaged as a spiritual experience.

⁶¹ Lixey. 42

3.1 Exertion and winning

Like love, suffering in sport is an experience that can also be an energizer of body spirit union. Suffering's immediacy marshals the full engagement of the entire person. The senses are electrified, every organ works to their limit, and the thoughts and feelings of the athlete may be calm and focused or for the less practiced, nuclear! Jesus sweating drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane comes to mind as a visceral parallel. Moses, Elijah and Jesus and their arduous hikes up Mt. Sinai, Mt. Moriah, and the wilderness were utterly exhausting and dangerous physical feats that opened up the vistas to both personal and world-changing revelations.

Writing on William James, and his views on suffering in sport, Sheehan wrote: "He always championed the life of sanctity or poverty or sport. He was always caught up with the athlete or the saint, whom he saw as the athlete of God. He always admired the ascetic way of life, which is no more, as the original Greek word would have it, than athletic training. 'Asceticism,' he stated, is the profounder way of handling human existence."⁶² James and Sheehan are both drawing influence from the "agon motif." This transcultural social principle refers to the individual accepting increasing levels of risk in competition to become "exceptional, perfect, personally honored or superior."⁶³ What

⁶² Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*. 201

⁶³ Ivo Jirásek and Emanuel Hurych, "Pain and Suffering in Sport," *Human Movement* 13, no. 2 (2012): 185–189.185

was originally an idea describing war and the warrior transformed into the sport agon, whose battles are temporal and negate the risk of death but “uphold the value of victory at a higher level than the one of life.”⁶⁴

Of the four principles on the purpose of pain and suffering in sport outlined by Ivo Jirasek, two are helpful in better understanding this Jamesian “athlete of God.” They are the “sign of one’s training regime and lifestyle” and the “sign of maximum exertion to reach top achievement,” ideas that resonate deeply with themes in Christian spiritual formation.⁶⁵ The pain and suffering comes from implementing and sustaining the former for the sake of attaining the latter. The parallel connections with the Apostle Paul’s autobiographical notes on spirituality are striking.

“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:12–14).

His own “top achievement” is described in the previous verses: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil 3:10–11). According to one commentator, Paul is referring to a daily experience of this

⁶⁴ Jirásek and Hurych.185

⁶⁵ Jirásek and Hurych. 186

“power of resurrection”, which is the goal, while the suffering is akin to the pain that comes as a price to winning the prize.⁶⁶

Hawthorne and Martin argue that when he speaks of a desire to “know” Christ, Paul has in mind a “personal encounter with Christ that inaugurates a special intimacy with Christ that is life-changing and ongoing.”⁶⁷ Further, the verb *γινώσκειν/γινῶναι*, “to know,” and its cognates (cf. v 8) “often focus attention upon the ideas of understanding, experience, and intimacy, even the intimacy of the sexual relationship in marriage (cf. Matt 1:25), based on the Heb. *yāda’*.”⁶⁸ This consummate knowledge of Christ is inseparable from the sufferings that come with such fellowship. In fact, they ought to be seen not as distinct but alternate aspects of the same experience.⁶⁹ Winning and suffering are inextricably tied for the warrior, the athlete and the apostle. This connection makes it useful to examine pain and suffering as a phenomenon among athletes and saints alike, particularly when it is something that could be avoided. What is common among the dedicated is a voluntary suffering catalyzed by an insatiable appetite for the prize.

⁶⁶ G. J. Wenham and D. A. Carson, eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, Revised edition (Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).1255

⁶⁷ Gerald F. Hawthorne et al., *Philippians*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David Allen Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, Revised edition (Zondervan, 2015).197

⁶⁸ Hawthorne et al.

⁶⁹ Hawthorne et al.197

3.1.1 Mastery and failure

Paul's vision of his life as a disciple of Jesus also sheds light on the relationship between mastery and failure, things that sport uniquely offers a robust environment for. Just as Paul's "pressing on", is in and of itself the ultimate state, since mastery would mean he stays driven to pursue Christ, so the motivation to improve, the experience of failure, and the hope in reengagement is part of the art and beauty of spiritual progress that sport metaphorically reveals.

Both athletes and saints pursue mastery for various reasons, with what are deeply hidden and sometimes mysterious drives. Perhaps they were shaped by a childhood experience, a certain belief about self and the world, and of course, in some cases they were just in the right place at the right time. Some chase mastery out of vain glory-seeking, or out of spite for others, while many seek it for the pursuit of just getting better. Winning, mastery and excellence in sport reveals to us that "What we share [with pro athletes], and it is vital that we not lose sight of this, is not their athleticism, but their capacity for transcendence, their ability to achieve excellence."⁷⁰ If our transcendence is to "know Christ in the power of his resurrection" then our excellence could come in the form of being able to endure and continue in "the fellowship of his suffering." As we shall see in chapter 4, for disciples of Jesus, excellence for us resembles that of the athlete in that it requires much intentionality, rehearsal and courage. It will often involve

⁷⁰ Patrick M. (Patrick Michael) Kelly, *Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015). 188.

suffering as well. The trophy for the saints, according to Paul, is not a wreath that decays but an imperishable one (1 Cor 9:25). The reward, as he so passionately exclaimed earlier, is Jesus himself—in fullness.

3.2 Why Suffer?

Why did the Son of God weep, hunger, thirst, bleed, and die? It is Jesus' example that inspired countless others to follow his footsteps in ascetic disciplines, missional initiatives in the face of persecution, and even martyrdom. In fact, it is quite impossible to fully appreciate the nature of the Christian life without a serious understanding of suffering. Perhaps most profound, is the fact that much of the suffering he endured could have been avoided. The 40 days of fasting in the wilderness (Matt 4:2), the early morning times of prayer in the mountains (Mk 1:35), Judas' betrayal (Jn 6:70), his pivotal conversation with Pilate, or the lack thereof (Mk 15:2-5), are but a few of the examples where Jesus, by choice, positioned himself in the path of suffering. There was nothing unique about the cross Jesus died on, but it was the fact that a righteous man was rejected and crucified while the criminal (Barabbas) was released and embraced (Matt 27:20).

Jesus' death and suffering stands apart from the others because it was a wrongful death, one that revealed humanities disdain for a humble, compassionate, and suffering Messiah, who in their eyes was impotent. For they said, "save yourself, and come down from the cross" (Mk 15:30). It is precisely because of its paradoxical nature that the cross

remains central to the Christian faith and defines a spiritually formative framework of suffering. In a theology of the cross, experiences of suffering, failure, vulnerability, and limit are held up as context where hidden truth may be revealed."⁷¹ It is through his suffering that Jesus unified both his message and his life, with the culminating event of the cross.

3.2.1 Opportunities and benefits

In his article, "Suffering and Virtue," Ian James Kidd suggests that suffering has the potential to stimulate "edification," a transformative process with three benefits: increased capacity to cope with suffering, moral and spiritual growth, and a transformation of how one views the world and engages it."⁷² The insights from this study on the transformative potential of suffering in illness, disease and loss, contain some noteworthy parallels to sport, since the opportunity for personal growth in both types of suffering hinges on the response of the individual.⁷³ Whether it is cancer, an amputated arm, or the "brick wall" of the twentieth mile in a marathon, the existential significance of these experiences rest on one's interpretive lens and the choices that shape the response. A positive response in both illness and sport can achieve a

⁷¹ Pamela R. McCarroll, *The End of Hope--The Beginning: Narratives of Hope in the Face of Death and Trauma* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2014). 3

⁷² Ian James Kidd, "Transformative Suffering and The Cultivation of Virtue," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 22, no. 4 (2015): 291–94. 293

“modified but nonetheless rich texture of life.”⁷⁴

Additionally, there is a sense in which suffering “speaks” to the postmodern desire for experience and addresses the suspicion towards metanarratives.⁷⁵ Suffering possesses the unique capacity to be both personal and subjective while maintaining a degree of grounding in reality. Physical suffering, depending on the activity, can be a universal experience with some degree of variation with each individual. While not everyone running a marathon will complete it in under three hours, every person attempting to run can experience what it is to push the limits of their body and mind and open the doors to a transformative suffering experience.

This is not an exhaustive study on all the possible aspects of human suffering or a theological contribution to the discussions on theodicy. It is primarily an interdisciplinary consideration of suffering that is both bodily and voluntary. Suffering as that which an individual must confront in the form of fears, physical pain, and other avoidances, whether conscious or subconscious. While the implications of this research may correlate to the study of suffering occurred through trauma, loss, and mental health and beyond, our interests remain on suffering that is experienced through physical exertion in sport. Examples may include a distance runner pushing the pace on a training run for a faster time or the fatigue and concentration a Christian must overcome

⁷⁴ Kidd, “Transformative Suffering and The Cultivation of Virtue.” 291

⁷⁵ McCarroll, *The End of Hope--The Beginning*. 10

when fasting for multiple days in what is a very physically demanding time of prayer. Voluntary suffering is beneficial because suffering in sport and spiritual growth reinforce each other.⁷⁶ For many Christian athletes, this “‘Theology of the body’ in which body, mind, and spirit are inextricably linked”⁷⁷ is assumed. Susan Saint Sing, a renowned coach and athlete in several sports offers poignant reflection on why athletes choose to suffer:

“I believe they do it, we do it, to see what we are made of—meaning to see if there is anything more, anything other than flesh and sweat and blood. We do it to see if there is a soul looking at us in the extreme fumes of exhaustion. As in a near-death experience, we go in a controlled fashion into these realms to see, to explore the depths of ourselves, begging of the Other. Like a pilgrimage, a cleansing, a retreat, we merge more human, more alive, more aware.”⁷⁸

Sing’s idea points to the search and discovery embedded in the physical challenges found in sport. This common drive appears across multiple sports from athletes of various backgrounds. Similar stories could just as easily be quoted from monastics, spiritual pilgrims journeying the far edges of the earth, and countless athletes. A restless desire for exploration has led humanity to the corners of the world, outer space, and the depths of the Seas. Her vivid and poetic depiction captures the unique opportunity sport offers participants to access the depths of what may be considered the most mysterious landscape of all: the human soul.

⁷⁶ Greve, “Jesus Didn’t Tap,” 2014.144

⁷⁷ Greve.141-143

⁷⁸ Kelly, *Youth Sport and Spirituality*. 166-167

3.3 The Necessity of Suffering

The experience of suffering in sport shares many parallels with suffering in general. To choose suffering, it is essential that one understands why we avoid it. Psychiatrist and best-selling author, M. Scott Peck begins a section in *The Road Less Traveled* with a quote from the “Four Noble Truths:” “Life is difficult” or “Life is suffering.” Peck argues that the denial of this truth is one of the leading causes of pain. He writes, “Once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult.”⁷⁹ For Peck, solving the problem of suffering requires an acceptance of the truth and the tool of discipline.

3.3.1 Numbing at all costs

What is popularly considered today as escapism, or “numbing”⁸⁰ as Brene Brown describes it, is the primary reason for our suffering. In a culture that is only pleasure-seeking, the substitutes that Peck refers to are often found in the social ills often discussed in the media. We are the most “obese, medicated, addicted, and in-debt Americans ever”, argues Brown.⁸¹ Brown’s list consists of what we may call “symptoms”

⁷⁹ M. Scott (Morgan Scott) Peck, *The Road Less Traveled : A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).15

⁸⁰ Brené Brown, Ford Library E.-Book Collection, and Ford Library Kindle E.-Book Collection, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 2010).

⁸¹ Brené Brown, Ford Library E.-Book Collection, and Ford Library Kindle E.-Book Collection, *The Gifts of Imperfection [Electronic Resource] : Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 2010).

often associated with a person's unwillingness to confront the shadows lurking in their lives. This procrastination begins as an effort to avoid the pain in life, but the substitute turns out to be more painful than the legitimate once we attempt to escape.⁸² Not unlike the denial and escape from suffering, writing on the problem with leadership in America, Edwin Friedman suggests that the obsession with data and methods among leaders is a symptom of a paralyzing anxiety motivated by the desire to escape an honest self-inventory. "...the chronic anxiety in American society has made the imbibing of data and technique addictive, precisely because it enables leaders not have to face their selves."⁸³ This avoidance of self is polar opposite to what athletes pursue through sport. They are seeking greater self-knowledge and even self-discovery through the challenges that come with the suffering. In the case of the runner, "...he runs because he has to. Because in being a runner, in moving through pain and fatigue and suffering, in imposing stress upon stress, in eliminating all but the necessities of life, he is fulfilling himself and becoming the person he is."⁸⁴

⁸² Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*. 17

⁸³ Edwin H. Friedman, Edward W. Beal, and Margaret M. Treadwell, *A Failure of Nerve : Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, [New ed.]. (New York: Seabury Books, 2007). 21

⁸⁴ Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*. 22

3.3.2 Is it God's will?

Peter's famous response to Jesus when he warned them of his impending death and suffering is perhaps indicative of this natural human response to the threat of suffering: "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."" (Matt 16:22) Jesus confirms the suspicion that this vehement resistance to suffering and death is, after all, a human condition: "But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'" (Matt 16:23) Peter's instinctive desire to spare his master from the tragic things of life turned out to be a hindrance to God's will, moreover, a demonic influence at that. Jesus identifies Peter with Satan because he speaks the same temptation: the kingdom without the cross (Matt 4:9-10) or winning without suffering.⁸⁵

3.4 Suffering and Discipleship

The cross, or the suffering associated with it, was not exclusively prescribed to Jesus. Jesus expected of his followers "a willingness to suffer, even to the point of martyrdom: to 'to take up his cross and follow' him."⁸⁶ Ladd agrees that to take up one's

⁸⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, First edition (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 1994). 91.

⁸⁶ Paul Tanner, "The Cost of Discipleship: Losing One's Life for Jesus' Sake," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society; Lynchburg* 56, no. 1 (March 2013): 43–61.

cross “means to be willing to go as Jesus went to a martyr’s death.”⁸⁷ In this vein, Søren Kierkegaard criticized the Danish Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of grace as a loophole for acquiring divine grace without any concept of discipleship.⁸⁸ He writes, “Yes, loving; that is why he would like you finally to will what he [God] for the sake of eternity wills for you: that you might resolve to will to suffer, that is, that you might resolve to will to love him, because you can love him only in suffering, or if you love as he wills to be loved you will come to suffer...”⁸⁹

Writing from a vastly different social context a century later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* and addressed the same concern of a “cheap grace” that had saturated the Christian community.⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer laments: “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate’. *Costly* grace, on the other hand, ‘is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”⁹¹ Bonhoeffer vehemently argued

⁸⁷ Tanner.

⁸⁸ David R. Law, “Redeeming the Penultimate: Discipleship and Church in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 14–26.

⁸⁹ Andrew Benjamin and Samuel Cuff Snow, “Economies of Suffering: Kierkegaard and Levinas,” in *Perspectives on Human Suffering* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2012), 33–42, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2795-3_4. 36

⁹⁰ Law, “Redeeming the Penultimate.” 16-17.

⁹¹ Ibid

against a lazy compromising faith that dismissed elements of personal risk, sacrifice and even harm, and struck at the heart of the problem that suffering in sport could help address. For these are some of the costs associated with a life of discipleship.

“No pain no gain” is a popular slogan in sports and *No cross, No crown*, the title of a book by William Penn, speaks to a similar idea as the former. To win, one must suffer. In Christianity, winning means to follow Jesus faithfully until the end, while for an athlete it will generally mean besting your last achievement. Moreover, they both share the common virtue of leveraging suffering as a means of growth. “The first sphere where we can meet pain in sports is in one’s training regime and lifestyle. What is notable at first sight is the strict training regime of top athletes, which can be compared to the monastic way of life...”⁹² The many parallels make the monastic tradition a useful lens by which we can understand sport as a complementary means of spiritual formation.

3.4.1 Suffering as an arena

The athlete and saint choose to suffer because they are motivated to growth, discovery, and learning. Like the Apostle Paul, these “athletes of God” press forward and never accept the illusion that they have “arrived.” It is akin to what Zen master

⁹² Jirásek and Hurych, “Pain and Suffering in Sport.” 187.

Shunryu Suzuki taught as the “Beginner’s Mind”, or what Jesus called “childlikeness.” It is the belief of those who never “arrive” but are perpetually progressing toward a state that is impossible to possess in this life. The perfect union with Christ and the humble posture of a beginner are what they are after. Most of all, it is the pursuit that compels them to stay in the race. Just as Paul urged the believers in Corinth, “Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it”, Sheehan speaks of a running that became an embodied metaphor: “My fitness program was never a fitness program. It was a campaign, a revolution, a conversion. I was determined to find myself. And, in the process, found my body and the soul that went with it.”⁹³

The mysterious symbiosis between sport and spiritual formation is what energizes the thoughts of William James, who suggests that “this type of discipline would allow us to live to our maximum. And find in ourselves unexpected heights of fortitude and heroism and the capability to endure suffering and hardship. To discover, if you will, the person we are. Reaching peaks we previously thought unattainable.”⁹⁴

James is helpful because he understood that life was meant to be a struggle. In other words, his acceptance of suffering provides a helpful framework that can counter the pervasive escapism that saturates our milieu. Life, he said, “was built on doing and

⁹³ Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*. 51.

⁹⁴ Sheehan and Moore. 201.

suffering and creating.”⁹⁵ He wrote that “man must be stretched,” in one way or another. Sport is one way among many where such doing, suffering and creating can be rehearsed within a structure, endlessly. As Sheehan wrote, sport is an “arena” where a person could test, push, and meet themselves in ways not possible in more restrained environments. For Peck, this challenge comes by way of choice, and subsequently discipline. Discipline is the means by which we learn the “techniques of suffering” that allow us to work through the problems and solve them with learning and growth.⁹⁶

3.5 Choosing Suffering

Choosing suffering has been a timeless quality of warriors and saints. “The only easy day was yesterday!”⁹⁷ The motto at Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training (BUD/S), the grueling 6 months long test all candidates must successfully complete if they want the chance to wear the venerable trident and become a U.S. Navy Seal. The training is designed to fail 75 to 80 percent of the class. A conveniently located brass ship’s bell awaits to be rung for those wanting to quit. In fact, the candidates are often enticed to drop on request (DOR), and admonished to end the suffering by taking the

⁹⁵ Sheehan and Moore. 200.

⁹⁶ Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*. 81.

⁹⁷ Gary Williams, *SEAL of Honor [Electronic Resource] : Operation Red Wings and the Life of Lt. Michael P. Murphy, USN* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2010).59.

easy way out.⁹⁸ The instructors push the candidates to choose the path of least resistance, so that their decision to stay would be a fully conscious and active commitment.

Uninterested in the passive accidental disciple, Jesus often made it difficult for people to follow him as well. When a scribe volunteered his allegiance, Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." (Matt 8:20-22) To those that Jesus said they must "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself," (Lk 14:26) the invitation to discipleship was nothing less than an open commitment to suffering. Discipleship was offered without any kind of curating of the reality Jesus' followers would need to embrace. In these stories, we see Jesus essentially cornering potential disciples to a decision point that demanded a clear choice of their ultimate allegiance. While some went away grieving, for Jesus' invitation required too great a sacrifice (Mk 10:22), the ones that stayed dropped their "nets" and surrendered the sense of safety they previously enjoyed.

⁹⁸ Williams. 61.

3.5.1 A great compelling

Charlie Engle, a former college athlete who had lost focus and direction in life, fell into the grips of alcohol and cocaine addiction and saw no way out until he accidentally discovered running. He began with marathons then competed in ultramarathons that ranged from 130 to 250 miles, and eventually ran across the country as well as the Sahara Desert.⁹⁹ While family, rehab and other support systems aided his recovery, he was only truly happy when he was suffering. In his book, *Running Man: A memoir*, he questions why he was not content when he had overcome his drug addiction and had achieved the American dream: “I had two great kids, a nice house and a supportive wife. Why didn’t that feel like enough?” Deep inside, he knew the answer: “I felt happiest and most alive when I was in peril.”¹⁰⁰

For Engle, suffering was a matter of life and death. It was the one experience powerful enough to keep the whispers of crack cocaine at bay. He recalls the time he first heard of the Eco-challenge, a 300-mile adventure race, 9-day team adventure race, and the narration that grabbed him by the throat: “push yourself until the pain comes, until you feel like you can’t survive, and then go on. Here the ego will let go, here you will be purified.” He confesses that he was sold when he saw “what those competitors were putting themselves through: the danger, the exhaustion, the breakdowns, the

⁹⁹ Charlie Engle, *Running Man : A Memoir*, Audible Edition (New York: Scribner, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Engle. (2:44:30).

puke, the disorientation, the fear, and the sleep deprivation. It looked like absolute hell.”¹⁰¹ What would turn away most viewers from the remotest consideration of participating in such an event, captivated the imagination of a man obsessed with staying clean and maintaining his sobriety. Moreover, Engle learned that doing his best to avoid drugs and alcohol to maintain the American dream was sorely inadequate. He needed something more compelling; he needed suffering.

While Engle’s fight against addiction represents an unusual set of drives for suffering, the fact that suffering in sport could “outgrip” the seductive power of a narcotic is quite extraordinary. People like Engle need and choose suffering because “Suffering has a palpable presence. The ubiquity of suffering—both its everydayness as well as its inescapable exigency—makes demands.”¹⁰² He recalls the advice he got from an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) member: “find a passion, something that would matter so much that you would do anything not to lose it. Something so precious and powerful that it would override any impulse to use again.”¹⁰³ Although some of the AA members teased Engle about finding a new addiction in running, he saw the experience as so unique and life-altering that “nothing else made me feel so clean, so focused, and so

¹⁰¹ Engle. (2:28).

¹⁰² Benjamin and Snow, “Economies of Suffering.” 33.

¹⁰³ Engle, *Running Man*. (2:11:2).

happily spent.”¹⁰⁴ His experience was more than just a masochistic demand for pain. He describes the drugs and alcohol as a way out while running was a way through. Following the advice of an AA member who told him to find a spiritual connection to something he loved, Engle poured all his energy into the one thing more captivating than alcohol or drugs.

3.5.2 Training the will

Suffering for the sake of faithfully following Jesus can include a diverse litany of painful experiences, none of which may be related to sport. However, whether the suffering comes from persecution because of one’s identification with marginal figures or as a result of prophetic witness to a hostile culture, every individual maintains the ability to choose how they will respond. Suffering because of faith and voluntarily in sport, both require decisiveness, endurance in the face of pain, and the will to make hard, even painful decisions. The crossover of the two domains offer value both in life and in athletic training.

Rather than numb the pain or fear that throbs with pressure within, Engle’s story encapsulates Peck’s idea of accepting and negotiating suffering through discipline. It is because Jesus himself was “...tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (Heb 2:18). If suffering is essential to the Christian life, then the higher

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

pain tolerances found among athletes¹⁰⁵ will certainly be an advantage both in and out of competition, since their capacity to push beyond initial suffering invites greater growth opportunities. These athletes and saints choose suffering because it opens up new inner frontiers of self-knowledge and awareness. It contains immeasurable value for growth, adventure, and even personal transformation. But as we shall see, suffering even goes deeper into the recesses of our identity formation, beliefs, fears and loves.

According to Ladd, the Kingdom demands a resolute, even radical, decision from those who wish to follow Jesus. While it may seem difficult to rehearse such resolve in the mundane day-to-day decisions we make, in suffering there is no middle ground. One either pushes through or yields to it. In suffering we are forced to choose. The Gospel is very much like it, in the sense that “The basic demand of the Kingdom is a response of man’s will.”¹⁰⁶ Here, suffering can be what William James calls a “dynamogenic agent, a moral equivalent of war,”¹⁰⁷ or a “disciplinarian.”¹⁰⁸

Not unlike the function of the Mosaic law, which was given to reveal sin and to show the reality of the human condition apart from the saving grace of God, so suffering

¹⁰⁵ Alex Hutchinson and Malcolm Gladwell, *Endure: Mind, Body, and the Curiously Elastic Limits of Human Performance*, Audible Edition (William Morrow, 2018). 3:32:00.

¹⁰⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom; Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*. (Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans: Eerdmans, 1959). 97.

¹⁰⁷ Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*. 198.

¹⁰⁸ “Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.” (Gal 3:23).

provides a similar window into the truth about human limits, intentions, and beliefs.

Paul writes, “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Rom 7:7). In the rest of the section, the apostle painstakingly points out how the Law was never the end but a means to the knowledge of God’s mercy and grace in Christ. Hence, in suffering through sport with spiritual formation in sight, the end is not physical progress and advancements in athletic performance but a process of purification.

3.5.3 A preeminent tutor

In his *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard wrote extensively on both useless suffering and the kind that was purifying and beneficial to the soul. Much like an athlete repeatedly immersed in suffering through training or competition, who has to choose to endure or submit to the pain, this “decision,” was a repeatable faith-renewing act.¹⁰⁹ The suffering was a useful means to an end if the moment in time and eternity intersect, and brings forth eternal truth.

“Kierkegaard identified the moment as the moment of decision, the moment of transfiguring vision, the moment of contemporaneity with Christ. It was also the moment to let go of indirect communication and to speak directly. Given the intersection of time and eternity within the moment, an actively faithful person has the chance to re-instate significantly their faith in the instant of suffering.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Norelle Lickiss and Jeff Malpas, *Perspectives on Human Suffering* (Dordrecht ; New York: Springer, 2012). 36-37.

¹¹⁰ Lickiss and Malpas. 37.

This idea of a time eternity intersection in suffering finds vivid practical connection in Merton's observation on the purifying qualities of penance:

"We must suffer...Our five senses are dulled by inordinate pleasure. Penance makes them keen, gives them back their natural vitality, and more. Penance clears the eye of conscience and of reason. It helps us think clearly, judge sanely. It strengthens the action of our will...It is the lack of self-denial and self-discipline that explains the mediocrity of so much devotional art, so much pious writing, so much sentimental prayer, and of many religious lives"¹¹¹

When suffering takes on the decisive commitment described by Kierkegaard and Merton, not only does it provide clarity and heightened awareness, it effects what may be one of the most central aspects of the spiritual life, the will.

Writing on Dorothy Day's faith journey and the role of suffering, David Brooks writes, "...she ardently chose suffering. At each step along the way, when most people would have sought out comfort and ease—what economists call self-interest or what psychologists call happiness—she chose a different route, seeking discomfort and difficulty in order to satisfy her longing for holiness."¹¹² According to Brooks, suffering is an unveiling experience that "drags you deeper into yourself", exposes the hidden

¹¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*. (New York, Farrar, Straus & Cudahy: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958). 26-27.

¹¹² David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, Kindle Edition (2015: Random House Publishing Group, 2015). 93.

layers of fears, pains, and repressed experiences.¹¹³ Additional benefits include a heightened sense of one's limitations and a "shattering of the illusion of one's mastery."¹¹⁴ It is not simply that suffering is useful for personal growth. Unlike a disease, people don't come out of suffering healed; they come out different. "They crash through logic of individual utility and behave paradoxically. Instead of recoiling from the sorts of loving commitments that often lead to suffering, they throw themselves more deeply into them."¹¹⁵

A description that could easily refer to the Apostle Paul can also apply to many other athletes and spiritual figures. As we have seen, suffering by choice, and thereby enduring the strain put on the body, mind and spirit, is a test like none other. While pain tolerance levels may vary among individuals, physical suffering affects all people regardless of personality type, body type, ethnicity, religious tradition, family of origin and so forth. Herein lies the essential quality that makes suffering through sport an indispensable means of spiritual formation—its efficacy is timeless and universal, as well as reproducible.

Belden Lane draws from the monastic traditions of the desert and makes a case for the importance of understanding the relationship between wild terrain (desert) and

¹¹³ Brooks. 94.

¹¹⁴ Brooks. 95.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

spirituality. Geography and theology are in Lane's study, reflexive and dialogical. Just as talk about God cannot be separated from discussions of the body, so Lane argues that "A desert-mountain environment (or any landscape, for that matter) plays a central role in constructing human subjectivity, including the way one envisions the holy."¹¹⁶ His insights into the spiritually formative experience that the desert provides mirrors the kind enjoyed through suffering in sport. Barring some differences in the environment of the activity, the narrative could just as easily describe Charlie Engle running up a desert trail as much as a monastic spending time in retreat and fasting:

"They (the desert) heal, as well as mirror, the brokenness we find within. Moving apprehensively into the desert's emptiness, up the mountain's height, you discover in wild terrain a metaphor of your deepest fears. If the danger is sufficient, you experience a loss of competence, a crisis of knowing that brings you to the end of yourself, to the only true place where God is met."

Lane's emphasis on the "sufficiency of the danger," is critical for understanding how suffering plays a critical role in opening the door to spiritual learning opportunities. For example, a runner may be able to sustain long periods of a pace that is just below their threshold without feeling too much fatigue or mental alerts. But suffering involves going over the edge, as it is perceived in the moment. It is the equivalent to this "wild terrain," that possesses from her visitor any sense of competency or control with frightening immediacy.

¹¹⁶ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes : Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). 9.

It's been said that "there are no atheists in the foxhole." Suffering in sport is a unique way to reproduce the positive opportunities of a foxhole-like experience, without the life-threatening risks of a gun battle in war. Whether it is in the overwhelming landscape of the desert, the immanent threats of a foxhole, or the tenth-mile of a training run, the physical vulnerabilities associated with these contexts bring an individual to the forefront of both what is happening and what really matters. In other words, such threats to physical comfort invoke deeply emotional and existential considerations. The decision to continue running, fighting, or being present requires a personal battle on many levels. These multi-faceted confrontations require an engagement of the entire person. That is the power of such experiences. They make possible the type of knowing and learning that goes beyond the borders of a classroom, small group, auditorium, or a video presentation.

3.5.4 A deeper knowing

E. Stanley Jones, well-known missionary to India, introduced the idea of an unconverted subconscious. He believed that the lack of congruence between the conscious confessions of faith and the subconscious atheism in the same individual was the cause of much psychological disorders, destructive behaviors and relational brokenness among those who identified themselves as Christians.¹¹⁷ The idea is that

conversion requires a deeper change at the subconscious level, perhaps the hidden core mechanism that really drives a person's life.

A similar construct is found in Augustine. Built on his belief that as self-conscious, existential beings, "it [subconscious] was the most continuous example of the way in which we are unable to move on from the things we have thought, and said, and done. At its worst, it can take us through a run of troubling scenarios that mock and dismantle our virtuous vision of ourselves."¹¹⁸ Jesus condemned those he called hypocrites by quoting Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." (Mk 7:6). His words were directed at those who were highly religious but seemed to have lacked a deeper change or what Jones called, a subconscious conversion.

The Apostle Paul's famous confessions of his own inner conflict (Rom 7:21-24) suggests that spiritual progress is not simply based on outward signs of baptism, membership, and service in a religious organization but possesses an inner dimension that remains a work in progress long after conversion. Carl Jung and William James have written extensively on the role of the subconscious in religious experiences and how "a long period of subconscious incubation often precedes sudden religious

¹¹⁷ David K. Carson et al., "The Unconverted Subconscious in Psychotherapy: Biblical Foundations, Psychological Explorations and Clinical Applications," *Journal of Psychology and Theology; La Mirada* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 276–93.

¹¹⁸ Miles Hollingworth, "Augustine and Spiritual Autobiography, Part 2," *The Expository Times*, n.d., 10.14.

conversions.”¹¹⁹ While there is no proof of a subconscious role in the life of faith, there is ample biblical support of an overall theme that suggests that the “heart” or sometimes “soul” refers to a hidden and spiritually significant part of a person.¹²⁰

3.5.4.1 Military and corporate insights

The following trend in cutting edge developments in subconscious human performance training and video game marketing, signal the importance even secular institutions place on deeper change and learning. While their efforts are mainly militarily and commercially driven, we can still benefit from their insights into the inner workings of the mind, emotions and how the deeper self is affected in teamwork and personal decision making. Their attempt to maximize the benefits of the subconscious can provide clues to how suffering in sport can also serve as a tool for more spiritual ends.

The role of the subconscious in human performance and its impact on group synergy has been the subject of a groundbreaking study analyzing Google (Alphabet Inc.) and SEAL Team Six, the elite group of Navy SEALs who prefer the name, Development Group (DEVGRU). In these two high performing organizations, intelligence, proficient skills, and professionalism are assumed. The goal is to reach the “next level,” in what authors Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal define as *ecstasis*, the act of

¹¹⁹ Carson et al., “The Unconverted Subconscious in Psychotherapy.” 276.

¹²⁰ Carson et al. 278-279.

“stepping beyond oneself.”¹²¹ In *ecstasis*, a DEVGRU team performs beyond strategy, signals, and even eye contact. Their movement, response, and decision making resembles something akin to choreographed underwater ballet. Each member of the team operates in a flow state and is able to respond to the moment while reading each other’s anticipated moves and gestures. A kind of kinetic rhythm guides this experience of group flow. Far from random spontaneity,

“As this occurs, a number performance-enhancing neurochemicals flood the system, including norepinephrine and dopamine. Both of these chemicals amplify focus, muscle reaction times, and pattern recognition. With the subconscious in charge and those neurochemicals in play, SEALs can read micro-expressions across dark rooms at high speeds.”¹²²

Similar phenomenon has been measured with the employees at Google, who used participation at Burning Man, an End of Time ritual, exotic carnival, and a modern rite of passage all rolled into one, as part of their interviewing process for the CEO job. Stanford sociologist Fred Turner sees the festival as transforming the work of engineering into “a kind of communal vocational ecstasy.”¹²³ One Googler described his experience of working in a pyrotechnic team: “[We were] very focused, very few words, open to anything...no egos. We worked very tightly...I loved the ‘feeling of flow on the team—it was an extended, ecstatic feeling of interpersonal unity and timelessness we

¹²¹ Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal, *Stealing Fire: How Silicon Valley, the Navy SEALs, and Maverick Scientists Are Revolutionizing the Way We Live and Work*, Kindle Edition (Dey Street Books, 2017).

¹²² Kotler and Wheal.16.

¹²³ Kotler and Wheal.20.

shared throughout.”¹²⁴

While much more has been observed in respect to group flow, including the activation of the serotonin system and other neurochemicals that play a role in social bonding and increase group performance, such expansion of human performance and group dynamics is only possible when the influence of the subconscious is strategically leveraged. The power of influencing the subconscious is significant for group synergy as well as for individual decision making. It’s something businesses and marketing companies have already understood for decades.

Committed to using this knowledge for profit, Apple, Coca-Cola, American Express, Nike, Samsung, Sony and Ford invested \$7 million to fund a study into the neuroscience of buying behavior. Marketing researcher and consultant Martin Lindstrom and neuroscientist Gemma Calvert used both fMRI and EEG to scan the brains of more than two thousand shoppers. The most unexpected discovery: “shopping and spirituality seem to rely on similar neuronal circuitry.”¹²⁵

Lindstrom and Calvert’s extensive brain scan analysis revealed a strong parallel between people’s emotional engagement with such notable brands and their religious affections. The same hyperactivity in the caudate nucleus was captured when subjects viewed images associated with these top brands as well as when viewing sacred

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Kotler and Wheal, *Stealing Fire*.193.

religious iconography.¹²⁶ Such findings have led to a shift in business strategy, taking us from a so-called “information economy” to what author Alvin Toffler calls the “experience economy.”¹²⁷

Today’s leading brands understand that they are competing for a customer’s emotional loyalty. This “experience economy” consists of providing the shopper with a sense of affiliation, connection and even an identity forming experience with a brand. Sounds like something religion may have provided in certain periods in history. Such is a why thousands prefer to work at an Apple retail store that pays much less than the competition in exchange for what seems to be a spiritual or subconscious affinity for the brand. One candidate screened for employment shared, “My dream my whole life was to work for Apple and suddenly, you can, he said. ‘You’ve always been an evangelist for Apple and now you can get paid for it.’”¹²⁸ It is also how Starbucks can charge four dollars for a fifty cent cup of coffee. They have created the environment that convinces the shopper that you are indeed getting more than just a cup of coffee.¹²⁹ Thanks to the most aggressive stance on employing the best neuroscientists, the gaming industry is

¹²⁶ Kotler and Wheal.194.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ David Segal, “Apple Stores’ Army, Long on Loyalty but Short on Pay,” *The New York Times*, June 23, 2012, sec. Business Day, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/24/business/apple-store-workers-loyal-but-short-on-pay.html>.

¹²⁹ Kotler and Wheal, *Stealing Fire*.195.

now a multi-billion-dollar enterprise. “The developers strap beta-testing teens with galvanic skin responses, EKG, and blood pressure gauges. If the game doesn’t spike their blood pressure to 180 over 140, they go back and tweak the game to make it have more of an adrenaline-rush effect.”¹³⁰

A scary thought. Games are now being manufactured like narcotics. Rather than become hostages to such trends, suffering in sport provides a window through which the subconscious could be shaped for more productive and noble ends. If the military is working to take advantage of the subconscious to effectively execute the most dangerous missions and businesses are manipulating it to sell their latest video games, suffice it to say, the subconscious should be an area of interest for those interested in spiritual growth. How can we get smarter about our deepest influences and mold them toward a stronger relationship with God and a more meaningful relationship with self and the world?

Rather than attempt to reduce such studies as secular psychology that is elementally in conflict with a biblical anthropology, I believe such trends represent an opportunity for Christian thinkers and leaders to enter the conversation. The pioneering work of Harold G. Koenig, the Director of the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health and Professor at Duke University School of Medicine, represents such initiatives

¹³⁰ Kotler and Wheal. 196.

in the field of healthcare.¹³¹ His voluminous work on the relationship between spirituality and health have led to some groundbreaking initiatives and programs, including work developing a spiritual performance tool for the military's Special Operations Command (SOCOM).¹³² The collaborative approach is also found in the program at Duke's Integrative Medicine, whose "Wheel of Health," incorporates a holistic view of wellness and includes spirituality as one of the major components of health.¹³³

3.5.4.2 Learning from the crucible

Certain Christian psychologists have taken the initiative to address the subconscious in therapy by employing a "variety of experiential and emotion-focused interventions in an effort to explore and uncover hidden pain and the fear, shame and other core emotions lurking..."¹³⁴ Different techniques from vastly different times, but the focus on change through experience is not unlike the purpose of the crucible in ancient times. The tool central to the hermetic idea, which traces its history down from Egypt and Greece and was colored by Christian sacramental teaching. It contained two key concepts: sealing off—hermetically sealed, as we say and magical, especially in

¹³¹ <https://medschool.duke.edu/about-us/our-faculty/harold-g-koenig>

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ <https://www.dukeintegrativemedicine.org/patient-care/wheel-of-health/>

¹³⁴ Carson et al., "The Unconverted Subconscious in Psychotherapy."

magical transformation.¹³⁵ The alchemists of the Middle Ages considered the basic hermetic as useful for the transformation of metals, from base to precious ones—lead into gold through the use of a crucible or retort. The higher alchemy aimed at moral and spiritual transformation.

“The crucible and retort became symbols of creative growth. Fire and the twin elements sulfur and mercury came to represent the outside pressures exerted upon the human soul in its confined place. In extreme cases, the fire might be of hellish origin. But if the soul in question were strong enough, not mere passive matter, that spirit might undergo an alchemical change—a metamorphosis of the spirit in which the ordinary stuff of humanity could turn into something precious, emerging as if from a tightly sealed cocoon.”¹³⁶

The crucible symbolizes the qualities found in some of the most potent change agents. It is also akin to the conditions one would find in prison.

Vice Admiral Jim Stockdale was a U.S. Navy fighter pilot who was shot down and captured in North Vietnam in 1965. He was a prisoner of war for seven and a half years, he was tortured fifteen times, put in leg irons for two years, and confined in solitary for four years. Recalling his own crucible experience he writes, “A person’s ethical notions tend to crystallize in the hermetic. Mine did. The pressure chamber in which my most deeply felt ideas were forged was not a surgical operating room, not a

¹³⁵ James B. Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot: 431*, Kindle Edition (Hoover Institution Press, 1995).

¹³⁶ Stockdale.119-124.

pressure-packed classroom but a prison cell.”¹³⁷

Countless others, including the Apostle Paul, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Bonhoeffer, Mandela, to name a few, produced some of their most memorable writings or solidified their ideas that left a mark in the world during prison time. In prison, a person is turned to cattle. They are a number and all wear the same colored jump suit. They are herded from station to station throughout the day and stripped of all luxuries, comforts, and status symbols. Hence, it is no surprise that when these men were reduced to the bare minimum in life they had the opportunity to dig deeper than they may have otherwise.

As previously discussed, suffering and exertion in sport mirrors war. It is an experience of entering a self-made prison and mimics a crucible. The conscious mind alone cannot rationalize the experience. It is in these conditions that the deepest part of an individual, whether we call it the subconscious, soul or the spirit, is pushed to utmost honesty. Stockdale concluded from his eight-year imprisonment that the entire experience “distilled one all-purpose idea” for him. One that is simple, timeless, and as old any teaching known to man. He argues, “If the pressure is intense enough or of long enough duration, this idea spreads without even the need for its enunciation. It just takes root naturally. It is an idea that, in this big easy world of yakety yak, seems to violate the rules of game theory, if not reason...It is the idea that you are your brother’s

¹³⁷ Stockdale.176.

keeper.”¹³⁸ In what was a physically grueling experience of torture and isolation, he gained perhaps the most essential Christian teaching that runs throughout the Old and New Testaments, and is arguably the goal of spiritual formation: “the love of neighbor,” or as Paul put it, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Gal 5:14).

Most people will not have the opportunity to undergo the kind of prison transformation we have considered or suffer like quite like Stockdale. For the everyday people lacking the opportunity to enter such unique contexts of change, the suffering that comes with a commitment to growth in a sport can serve as a substitute crucible. Sport provides the arena for personal challenge and growth without necessarily having to be in prison for many years. It contains all the ingredients necessary for increasing self-awareness, humility, moral resilience, faith, and increased solidarity with others who suffer. “Sport invites activity that presses the edge of what it means to be human: it gives rise to a life of faith in one’s possibilities in the light of one’s limitations.”¹³⁹

Not every person experiences the same kind of change or growth through sport. But the same could be said of any religious programming in a church or a social and educational initiative. People learn, grow and change in different ways. However, the aspects of suffering we have reviewed come from a variety of communities of

¹³⁸ Stockdale.178.

¹³⁹ Richard A Hutch, “Sport and Spirituality: Mastery and Failure in Sporting Lives,” *Practical Theology* 5, no. 2 (August 2012): 131–52.

scholarship, from diverse regions, and spiritual practices that in sum, cast light on how far-reaching and relevant the connection really is.

4. Courage

Courage is a word that has lost its edge in modern life. In this section, we attempt to resurrect its significance to the life of faith, but also its relevance to psychosocial maturity and growth. It is presented as something that could be trained and exercised as well as something that is foundational for living a meaningful life. We consider how the benefits of courageous testing translates from one domain of experience to another as well as the sheer physicality that courage can take on. Linking the opportunities in suffering to the development and expression courage, we position its role in the life of faith, hope and love.

4.1 Suffering and Courage

Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries suggests that our preoccupation with where our suffering comes from, causes us to neglect the question, “where does our suffering take us?”¹⁴⁰ The type of suffering we have considered contains this future orientation, since the pursuit of progress is inevitably related to suffering in sport. As previously discussed, many of the athletes we have covered choose to suffer through sport, in a sense, to avoid suffering in a different way; the kind that is bitter and only destructive.

¹⁴⁰ Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir*, Audible Edition (Simon & Schuster, 2017).

Some of the competitors at the Kona Ironman utilized their participation in the grueling event as a way to “face” things they were avoiding from their past. Others like Engle, who obsessed with never going back to crack addiction, pursued a kind of suffering that was redemptive in nature through extreme endurance running events. He ran the wildest and most life-threatening races to keep his addictions at bay, while Sheehan ran to find his body and the soul that came with it. In an effort to learn Zen, we noted one philosopher taking up Japanese archery for several years. While spiritual disciplines and traditional ethical categories possess the potential to be integrated with the practice of sport,¹⁴¹ there is one aspect of the Christian life that is a unique match with suffering: it is courage.

4.2 Biblical images of courage

By courage, we mean what is also referred to as spirit, heart or even fearlessness. The Bible provides a rich tapestry of images of courage. After losing his beloved mentor and the preeminent leader of his people, Moses, Joshua is charged to take possession of Israel’s inheritance and told, in repetition, “Be strong and courageous” (Josh 1:6-7). In many parts of the Old Testament the word *heart*, was a common expression for courage. It corresponds to the Latin etymological root, *cor* (“heart”).¹⁴² The “bravest warriors”

¹⁴¹ Michael W Austin, “A Brief Theology of Sport,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 1 (March 2015): 205–9.

¹⁴² Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Accordance (InterVarsity Press, 2010).”courage”, 176.

(Amos 2:16 NIV) were literally “strong of heart.” Since weakness follows the human condition and the story of God’s people, obedience requires a high degree of courage.

Women like Ruth, Abigail, and Esther took significant risks to serve God in their time. The writer of Hebrews draws from Jesus’ own display of courage as the model that all believers should emulate. He paints the Christian life as one characterized by “boldness,” “confidence,” and “courage.”¹⁴³ Later in Chapter 11, he recounts the courageous stories of the heroes of faith who faced estrangement, opposed tyrants, received torture and were killed because they were looking to their eventual reward with Jesus as the ultimate exemplar (Heb 12:2-3). The closing exhortation could easily be a sport metaphor, as he encourages the reader to strengthen the feeble arms and knees (Heb 12:12), in a language borrowed from Isaiah’s own call to courage (Is 35:3-4).¹⁴⁴

Perhaps more striking is not the prevalence of courage in the great stories of the Bible but the condemnation of its absence. In what is a climactic chapter in the book of Revelation we read that only those who “conquer” will drink from the “spring of the water of life” in the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1-7; see also 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). The word means to be victorious and contains strong images of battle and

¹⁴³ Ryken, Wilhoit, and III.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

confrontation.¹⁴⁵ But among those who will be rejected from this final prize the first are the “cowardly” (Rev 21:8). These are the traitors for whom the lake burning with “fire and sulfur” will be their reward. Among the different uses of the term some languages refer to ‘coward’ as “one who always runs” or “one who runs at nothing.”¹⁴⁶ They are the ones who apostatize in order to dodge persecution and turn from their initial commitment to follow Christ.¹⁴⁷

Here we can make an initial connection between “running” from fears and Peck’s emphasis on the need to train in the “techniques of suffering,” as they promote facing rather than escaping one’s fears. Whether we determine that this conquest is only in our minds, in the invisible world of angels and demons, or involves the keeping of moral and religious teachings, one thing remains true regardless of one’s theological orientation. Conquest demands courage. And courage in the absence of fear, anxiety, unpleasant consequences, and vulnerability, really is no courage at all.

4.3 Courage needs a context

Sport provides a context in which suffering and courage become tangible, with immediate consequences and feedback. Any general fan of sports could you tell a story

¹⁴⁵ Joseph H. Thayer, Accordance electronic, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004). “νικάω”.

¹⁴⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., 2d, Accordance electronic ed., Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989). “δειλός”.

¹⁴⁷ Thayer. “δειλός”.

from a history filled with dramatic tales of individuals and teams that suffer adversity only to find a creative solution (often requiring courage) and make an epic comeback. The greatest stories, at least the most memorable ones, often take on such qualities. Suffering provides the drama necessary to fuel a satisfying climax. This journey from suffering to climax requires courage.

Courage—like love—cannot be learned in a classroom, a sermon or a TED talk. It can only be known in the domain of experience, since “There are thresholds which thought alone can never permit us to cross...an experience is needed,”¹⁴⁸ wrote Gabriel Marcel. For many, the Boston marathon is one of these experiences. The runner starts out “competitive and independent” and nears the finish with a “sense of dependence that is almost overwhelming.” This is because of the demands that a marathon puts on the body. Even the winner is essentially a “survivor.”¹⁴⁹ Analogously, courage cannot be learned or taught without a proper context that makes demands.

For the Israelites, and certainly for Moses, the freedom from slavery in Egypt hinged on numerous courageous acts waiting to happen. Their faith in God was inextricably tied to whether God delivered on promises that were national, economical, and political. It had very real context. For Moses, it meant confronting his own deepest fears and repeatedly facing the Pharaoh with some brazen demands as the spokesperson

¹⁴⁸ Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*. 212.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

for God's people (Ex 3-4). Whether it is David volunteering to face an impossible challenge against Goliath (1 Sam 17:31-32) or admitting his sin before Nathan the prophet (2 Sam 12:13), the contexts provided the opportunity for him to act courageously. Of course, his courage was precipitated by his faith in God's faithfulness and mercy (1 Sam 17:34-37; 2 Sam 12:16-20; Psa 51). In fact, it could be argued that because of David's faith in God, courage was possible. Moreover, we learn that his courage was cultivated by the "practice" of fighting lions and bears in the past (1 Sam 17:34-36). These "training" experiences served to build not only his faith but the courage to act on his trust in God. Likewise, when the disciples saw Jesus walking on water, Peter asked if he could join him. When called, Peter "got out of the boat, starting walking on the water, and came toward Jesus" (Matt 14:29). A pattern emerges from these narratives. The courageous acts of God's people seem to be rooted in a trusting relationship where exercises in faith are rehearsed through various tests that call upon courage.

To tell someone to develop courage without context is like administering the Lord's Supper with only words, sans bread and wine. In this sense, the over-spiritualization of faith does not elevate it but rather diminishes its substance. As Hans Urs von Balthasar rightly pointed out, the "aesthetic faculty of the human being is also a decisive characteristic which stimulates the quest for ultimate meaning. If such an integral anthropological view is applied, then sport can indeed be seen as an

extraordinary field where the human being experiences some significant truths about him- or herself on his or her quest for ultimate meaning.”¹⁵⁰ He seems to be describing the very experience that Sheehan writes about when he runs, “There on a country road, moving at eight miles an hour, I discover the total universe, the natural and the supernatural that wise men speculate about. It is a life, a world, a universe that begins on the other side of sweat and exhaustion.”¹⁵¹

4.3 Courage is courage

“When each of us faces difficulty and failure, stares down our own creaturely limits and perseveres toward our desired goal in the midst of the particular circumstances of our lives, we share company with all great athletes.”¹⁵² Courage learned in sport is valuable. Whether it is developed in the gym, seasonal practice, or during competition, courage is translatable. One runner describes the spiritual lessons he learns daily through his training: “We all yearn for spiritual growth, but we want the quick fix; we want it all now. But just as I had to keep training as a young runner, putting one foot in front of the other in that icy weather, we have to discipline ourselves spiritually, putting

¹⁵⁰ La famille et la vie Vatican. Dicastère pour les laïcs, “Giving the best of yourself: a document about the Christian perspective on sport and the human person / Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Vatican, 2018), 33.

¹⁵¹ Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*. 245.

¹⁵² Kelly, *Youth Sport and Spirituality*. 173.

one foot in front of the other to move toward the upward calling of Christ Jesus.¹⁵³ Running is not unique in this regard.

Eugene Herrigel spent six years in Japan learning archery—in order to learn Zen—where the physical context provided the tangible means of forming something spiritual. Regarding this Japanese tradition, one Zen master writes of the purpose behind the fusion of these two seemingly unrelated activities: “Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking. ‘childlikeness’ has to be restored with long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness.”¹⁵⁴ This self-forgetting is equally important in archery as it is in Zen. When the archer is empty of ulterior desires, fears and insecurities, and alas the ego, the archer and the bow become one. This compelling model of holistic spiritual formation is also pregnant with concepts that mirror some of Jesus’ own teachings on childlikeness, compassion, and self-denial. In his classic, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Suzuki describes the beginner’s mind as the aim of Zen practice. He writes,

“In the beginner’s mind there is no thought, ‘I have attained something.’ All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. The beginner’s mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Gary L. Thomas, *Every Body Matters: Strengthening Your Body to Strengthen Your Soul*, Kindle Edition (Zondervan, 2011). 1860-1864.

¹⁵⁴ Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*. viii-ix.

¹⁵⁵ Shunryū Suzuki et al., *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 1st edition. (New York ; Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1970). 3.

Paul's exhortation to meditate on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil 4:8), suggests that we are to embrace a variety of sources for the cultivation of the mind and heart. The list consists of what we would consider honorable values, both aesthetic and philosophical in nature. If archery is used to help develop the mind of compassion in students of Zen, why could it not be used to produce the same mind among Christians? The mind of compassion is learned in a controlled environment with technical instructions, but its application is as relevant to archery as it is to life. Just like courage is courage, whether learned in the arena or a combat war zone, so compassion is compassion. Kristin Armstrong, contributing editor of *Runner's World* agrees: "As we run we train our bodies, minds, and spirits, and our fitness levels in each category rise accordingly."¹⁵⁶

For practitioners of Zen, archery and other art forms such as calligraphy, are not compartmentalized activities or hobbies that have no bearing on the spiritual life. The spirit is trained with the body and vice versa. They inform and respond to each other. The goal is congruence—the body and spirit exhibiting a unified state of expression. Similarly, Novak contends that such is the goal of sports; to serve as a metaphor for life. "But the heart of human reality is courage, honesty, freedom, community, excellence: the heart is

¹⁵⁶ Thomas, *Every Body Matters*. Kindle Locations 210-212.

sports. Sports are not, of course, all of life. What good are courage, honesty, freedom, community, and excellence if they do not inform one's family life, civic life, political life, work life?"¹⁵⁷ This list of virtues are things that can be rehearsed and inculcated through sport, though they are really more for the rest of life.

Although sport is on the surface a game, a form of play, competition, and a hobby, its universal popularity has deep corollaries to the human desire to witness our most noble qualities exhibited through competition. Ideals Paul described as worthy themes of contemplation in life. It has been said that there are only three kinds of stories in the world: "man against man, man against the world, and man against himself." In sport, it is not uncommon to witness all three narratives playing out in one event. There are very few places in society outside of sport and military service where we can observe prominent displays of honor, courage, commitment, the three historic core values of the United States Navy. "Moral character is developed in sport, as in other spheres of life, in so far as such admired human qualities as loyalty, courage and resolution are cultivated and directed to uphold what is fair and just in the interest of all."¹⁵⁸

4.4 Bodily courage

In what was a highly countercultural book, *Every Body Matters: Strengthening Your Body to Strengthen Your Soul*, Gary L. Thomas tells the story of a three-hundred-

¹⁵⁷ Novak, *The Joy of Sports*. 42-43.

¹⁵⁸ Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker, *Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Routledge, 2012). 258.

pound pastor who was never challenged about his eating habits or fitness routines, or the lack thereof. It was not until he intentionally studied several key leaders in the Bible that he was convicted to do something about his physical condition. He dramatically transformed his lifestyle and incorporated disciplined eating with regular high intensity exercise. When the weight started coming off, he related how the physical change in his body also shaped his relationship with God and made him feel like he was living the way God designed him to live.

Thomas argues, the problem is partly because “We live in an acceptance-oriented society, where people are more afraid of hurting feelings than speaking the truth in love.”¹⁵⁹ It takes courage to address obesity among Christians and to name it as something that could be a spiritual problem as much as it is a physical one. As one who champions the use of the body to train the soul, he writes, “God gave us souls—and bodies to go with them., “To be fully alive, fully human, fully the people God created us to be, we have to care for our bodies, discipline them, and make them our servants in service to God.”¹⁶⁰ To this convenience-driven and ease loving culture, the committed athlete teaches us two critical things and even embodies the role of a cultural prophet:

“First, she reminds us that what is most profoundly human in us is our capacity to embrace the difficult, to face failure, to endure, to transcend our limits in pursuit of excellence. But at the same time, her determination to face that which is difficult, her

¹⁵⁹ Thomas, *Every Body Matters*. Kindle Locations 1368-1370.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas.

drive for excellence, shines an uncomfortable light on the woundedness of our human condition. It reveals our own tendency to cower in the face of difficulty and accept a comfortable mediocrity.”¹⁶¹

The qualities of facing the difficult and pursuing excellence, are not secular but noble ambitions for anyone, of any faith. They should be adopted by Christians as much as atheists, who pursue a meaningful life.

During his twenty-seven years of prison time, Nelson Mandela trained his spirit through his body. In a room barely larger than a queen-sized bed, he religiously ran in place and did push-ups and sit-ups to keep himself from waning. When he eventually moved to a larger cell, many of his cell mates were disgruntled by his daily 5:00 am one-hour runs around the cell.¹⁶² His running routine would continue even after he took office at the age of seventy-five. The discipline, hope and courage it took to push his body for twenty-seven years built in him a spiritual resolve that he needed to rely on as president.¹⁶³

In what is a groundbreaking work on the life and motivation of combat sport athletes, sociologist Loïc Wacquant observes,

“By willfully adhering to the dictates of the ethic of sacrifice, boxers tear themselves from the everyday world and create a moral and sensual universe that ‘elevate the individual above himself and ‘affords [them] a life very different, more exalted and more intense’ than that to which their mundane circumstances would consign them – which is Emile

¹⁶¹ Kelly, *Youth Sport and Spirituality*. 173.

¹⁶² Thomas, *Every Body Matters*. Kindle Locations 1201-1203.

¹⁶³ Thomas. Kindle Location 1202.

Durkheim's definition of religion."¹⁶⁴

If boxers use their training and competition in the ring as a self-elevating force, how much more are followers of Christ suited to the task of disciplining the body for the sake of spiritual transcendence? Speaking of just how deeply personal boxing was to him, former British champion Chris Eubank describes his experience in a fight where he fought through severe fatigue and injury, "my ancestors were in this punch, everything...everything was in this punch."¹⁶⁵

We may be in greater need than South Africa for tough and courageous followers of Jesus who have the will to train the spirit and the courage to discipline the body. The obesity epidemic for one, as previously mentioned, is a sign of much deeper issues.

Thomas says,

"All this talk about fitness, facing the pain of getting in shape, actively combating indulgence and laziness, is in many ways an appeal for the church to get tougher. We are soft. We often cave in at the slightest challenge. Men are lost to superficial sins; women are lost to superficial cares, and the work of the kingdom is neglected. If we don't get tougher, the work will never get done."¹⁶⁶

His depiction is that of a church without a clear mission, that is oblivious to the real threats to their wellbeing and preoccupied with illusions.

¹⁶⁴ Mark J. Won, "Are Combat Sports Spiritual?," *Marine Corps Gazette; Quantico* 101, no. 11 (November 2017): 40–45.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas, *Every Body Matters*. Kindle Location 1927.

Western Christians may do well do take note of the legendary monks of Mount Hiei, who put themselves through a consecutive 1,000 days of marathon distance run/jog in pursuit of enlightenment. In addition to meditation, solitude, and acts of service, they use this ultimate endurance challenge to reach a point of self-emptying and spiritual growth. Genshin Fujinami, one of the few monks to have completed the arduous spiritual challenge says, “All humans are asking the question: ‘Why are we alive?’ he says. “The constant movement for 1,000 days gives you lots of time to think about this, to reflect on your life. It is a type of meditation through movement. That is why you shouldn’t go too fast. It is a time to meditate on life, on how you should live.”¹⁶⁷

This “mediation through movement,” is a practice that could very well be utilized by Christians. Various methods and approaches could complement running and spiritual formation. One could easily recite a certain text, focus on thematic images, lift up verbal prayers, or practice stillness of soul while the body is in motion. The possibilities are many. “By investing in an activity with one’s dedication, aspiration, discipline, skill, and knowledge, one’s identity is linked to it...Through craftsmanship, a sport becomes an expression of the athlete’s total self...”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Adharanand Finn, “What I Learned When I Met the Monk Who Ran 1,000 Marathons,” *The Guardian*, March 31, 2015, sec. Life and style.

¹⁶⁸ Kelly, *Youth Sport and Spirituality*.165

4.5 Courage and faith

In Thomas Aquinas, we find a strong advocate for courage in the life of faith, who expanded the Aristotelian idea of courage (ultimate in facing of death in war) into the realm of the mundane and infused theological expression. Aquinas offered three developments beyond Aristotle's courage paradigm of warriors in battle and made it more relevant for faith. He enlarged the arena for the "battle" beyond the military context of war, thereby expanding its application. Secondly, he prioritized endurance as the defining quality of courage, arguing that endurance is more difficult than aggression. Finally, Aquinas defines martyrdom as the ultimate act of perfect courage, exemplified by Jesus' own martyrdom.¹⁶⁹ This image of Jesus' death as the pinnacle of courageous acts takes us now to an examination of how courage keeps faith vital.

One Navy Seal, also a Rhodes Scholar, shares what he learned from the warriors and nuns he encountered in combat zones and orphanages: "As warriors, as humanitarians, they've taught me that without courage, compassion falters, and that without compassion, courage has no direction. They've shown me that it is within our power, and that the world requires of us—of every one of us—that we be both good and

¹⁶⁹ LU Qiaoying, "Aquinas's Transformation of the Virtue of Courage," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 8, no. 3 (2013): 471–84.

strong.”¹⁷⁰ When applied to the Christian life, this combination of good and strong, can look like the combination of faith and courage.

Two aspects of Aquinas’ courage is helpful for a better understanding of this relationship. These are fear and daring. Both potentially impede the will from pursuing rational good when facing a difficulty. Fear is born of love of one’s life and the desire to protect it while daring represents an overzealous impulse to fight and overcome. The latter lacks the kind of moderation of reason found in the calm and deliberate judgments of courage. Fear is the more common obstacle to courageous action. “To summarize, courage is the habit of curbing fear that prevents the will from pursuing the rational good, as well as moderating daring so as to pursue the good in an appropriate way.”¹⁷¹ Queen Esther’s story serves as a classic example of holding this tension between fear and daring.

It was not enough for Esther to believe in the God of her cousin, Mordecai, or be immersed in the traditions of her Hebrew ancestors. When called to a testing of her faith, right doctrine wasn’t enough to get her in the King’s presence at the risk of her own life (Esth 4:9-17). In her case, courage was the willingness to challenge her own common sense and survival instincts (vv10-11) and let everything ride on her faith in God. The

¹⁷⁰ Eric Greitens Navy SEAL, *The Heart and the Fist: The Education of a Humanitarian, the Making of a Navy SEAL*, Reprint edition (Boston: Mariner Books, 2012).

¹⁷¹ Qiaoying, “Aquinas’s Transformation of the Virtue of Courage.” 476.

death Esther died was to her sensible self, realistic and attentive to the decree of the land. That version of her had to die in order for the one living by faith to emerge from the ashes. Her request that all the Jews hold a fast on her behalf and her last words, “After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish” (v16) signaled the presence of deep concern.

Even Jesus wrestled with his own voices of fear as he cried out in prayer, agonizing over the prospects of his betrayal and crucifixion (Matt 26:36-46). He shared with his disciples his own inner conflict as the cause of him feeling “deeply grieved, even to death” (v39) and cried out to the Father, “if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want” (v40). As Aquinas’ ultimate exemplar of courage, Jesus displayed the necessity of courage having to reawaken or demonstrate a vital faith by confronting his own fears through resolve and action. Hence, it is not that courage is a “work” in the legal sense, but a linkage between faith and works. To actually carry out what we believe, there is a process of overcoming doubts, fears, and even persecution to actualize the faith. Courage is the vehicle that gets us there, and like a muscle it can be trained through suffering in sport. It is no surprise that the greatest athletes among us are enshrined as heroes, as seeming cousin to artists, saints and prophets, partly due to the commitment, sacrifice, and devotion in which they apply themselves to a chosen path. David Tracey is right. What distinguishes the “athlete, thinker, the artist and saint from us is the intensification of their journey in self-

exploration and the discovery of their hidden potentialities. Theirs is a courageous journey that many of us fear to make.”¹⁷²

Athletes are willing to risk failure in the face of competition. It is something they face with great regularity. Richard R. Gaillardetz suggests that this deep dive into the world of repeated failure until mastery, presents a deathly dimension of sport that is akin to the death and resurrection concepts found in *paschal* living.¹⁷³ The paschal death recalls the Hebrew Passover (Pasch) and its death is metaphysical. Unlike terminal death, it is a death that ends one kind of life and opens the door to a deeper and richer form of life. The image of the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying so as to produce new life is an image of paschal death.¹⁷⁴ The ability to resurrect (paschally), or to get up after failure and get back to training (athletically), or embrace the grace of God after being buried under the weight of sin and shame, is where courage and faith prove to be inseparable.

Martin Luther describes this type of faith experience as something that cannot be understood until one has “tasted the great strength” faith offers in dangerous situations. “It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a man

¹⁷² Kelly, *Youth Sport and Spirituality*. 165.

¹⁷³ Kelly. 171.

¹⁷⁴ Kelly. 170.

[or woman!] when trials oppress him.”¹⁷⁵ There is no escaping the fact that Jesus’ invitation to discipleship comes with unnerving demands and a high social cost: deny self, bear the cross and follow. Suffice it to say, the implications of losing one’s life by entering the narrow door and hating all that one holds dear for the sake of loyalty to Jesus requires great resolve, on a daily basis. It is no wonder that descriptions of courage often resemble that of faith.

4.6 Courage and hope

Courage is ultimately revealed in hopeful action. There is a sense in which Christian martyrs are able to exhibit, in some cases, a supernatural degree of courage in the face of death because they have an assurance of hope in eternal life and the resurrection of the dead. Hebrews 11 is filled with such stories of men and women whose acts of courage became a legacy of faith for future generations. These faith-acts of God’s people were carried out at the risk of disappointment, failure and even death. It all makes sense when we see their actions as motivated by an “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). In contrast, we consider acts motivated by fear, cowardly. Courage and fear represent a crossroad followers of Christ must face repeatedly.

Many ancient writers considered the spiritual life as either progressing or

¹⁷⁵ Mary Gaebler, *Courage of Faith: Martin Luther and the Theonomous Self* (Fortress Press, 2013).

diminishing, with no plateaus.¹⁷⁶ The *will* to mature requires some presence of hope for what is possible, as well as the courage to act. It just so happens that growing in the arena of sport is one of the most tangible ways of dragging the spirit along with the body through consistent training regiments. Merton eloquently articulates how, unlike the animals and the trees who are content with being what nature intends, humans are made to grow into our destiny, “God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please...Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny.”¹⁷⁷ This partnership is a process, not unlike athletic training, and entails much failure and disappointment, and demands courage we sometimes don’t even know we have. Merton’s language agrees with that of William James, who believed exertion by the engagement of the will, was the best way to live a meaningful life.¹⁷⁸

In his book, *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness*, L. Gregory Jones writes, “...as the Church we also have turned inward and been shaped more by fear than by hope. We have become preoccupied with managing what already exists, rather than focusing on innovative renewal of organizations and entrepreneurial approaches to starting new ones.” This problem with fear of failure, “softness”, and risk-

¹⁷⁶ Thomas, *Every Body Matters*. Kindle Locations 1061-1062.

¹⁷⁷ Kelly, *Youth Sport and Spirituality*.164.

¹⁷⁸ Sheehan and Moore, *Running & Being*.

aversion that Jones sees as a macro church challenge, Thomas sees as an individual problem. He shares a story about his own battle with eating: “I was once a slave to my hunger. I obeyed it every time, because I didn’t want to feel hunger. Sometimes I even anticipated it. I ate a lot in advance, because I knew I ‘might’ become hungry if I didn’t. This fear caused tension, anxiety, impatience, and the death of peace, all because I *might* become hungry.” Unlike this type of risk aversion, one learns in sport to attempt new skills, challenges and enjoy the process of *trying*. It could be argued that to operate in fear of failure is to undercut the bountiful depth of God’s grace, which is truly the source of the Christian’s courage to fail. In other words, because of God’s grace the disciple of Christ can take even greater risks and bounce back. It is this embrace of creative failure that makes sport such an engaging and potentially, transformative, activity. Like many others, Thomas sees sport as the ultimate embodied metaphor that resets a person’s default orientation from safety to growth.

Two-time Olympic gold medal winner, Sebastian Coe poignantly shared, “Throughout my athletics career, the overall goal was always to be a better athlete than I was at that moment—whether next week, next month or next year. The improvement was the goal. The medal was simply the ultimate reward for achieving that goal.”¹⁷⁹ Each effort provides an opportunity to apply a different approach, technique, mindset or

¹⁷⁹ Pink Daniel H, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us.*, Kindle Edition (2011: Penguin Publishing Group, 2011). 112.

challenge. Of competition, Kretchmar observes, "I conclude that sport verdicts, unlike outcomes in war, business, and love, do not settle things. Rather they invite both winner and loser alike to 'play again tomorrow.'"¹⁸⁰ Sport is rare in that failure does not signal an end but the beginning of a learning process and motivates reengagement. Sport naturally instills a practice mindset and implicitly builds stronger resilience and a hopeful demeanor in individuals.

The pursuit of any goal has the potential to bring some experience of failure. It is a natural learning process. Courage and failure are two sides of the same coin. Those who act out in courage and take risks long and often enough will inevitably miss the mark. Cowardice leads to neither failure nor achievement. It does not engage the will but paralyzes it. It is in training, and enduring the suffering that comes with it, that the body along with the spirit are joined in the clutches of the will. The will is one of those rare terms pregnant with anthropological and theological meaning. It is also the one quality that courage and cowardice must negotiate on a regular basis. Theodore Roosevelt's famous quote from his 1910 "Man in the Arena" speech vividly captures this idea:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly;...who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high

¹⁸⁰ Scott Kretchmar, "Competition, Redemption, and Hope," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 39, no. 1 (May 1, 2012): 101–16.101.

achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.”¹⁸¹

How does one come to know whether he or she possesses courage without a challenge? The early Christians are often elevated to an idealized status because many proclaimed their faith and demonstrated the courage to follow Jesus at the cost of persecution, and sometimes death. Some wonder how the church in the West today would respond to a persecution of that kind. While critiquing “softness” in the church, Thomas questions how Western believers would respond if mass persecution was to take place:

In this context, we can ask ourselves, if an entire area were to slowly abandon the faith, would we be a Hermogenes or an Onesiphoros? Would we not only refuse to abandon God’s servants who speak the truth, but would we actively seek them out to provide encouragement and support in Jesus’ name? Such a commitment will require radical spiritual strength, and I believe that addressing the physical issues of laziness and overeating can have a significant impact on the church’s readiness. I don’t believe that riding a bike for a hundred miles, swimming across a lake, or running a marathon counts as “carrying our cross,” but getting in shape can help us build souls *willing* to carry a cross.”

If Thomas is correct in connecting physical training benefits to spiritual readiness, then the opposite could be just as true: the lack of physical activity is influencing the deterioration of spiritual readiness. Princeton professor, George Kateb’s observations highlight the unique value of sports in providing such growth mechanisms,

“We can add such activities as dangerous sports and other athletic activities, and the exploration of space...They provide tests of character under trying circumstances and allow a person to measure himself or herself without harming others. They help to make

¹⁸¹ Brené Brown, *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, Reprint edition (Spiegel & Grau, 2015).xx.

courage a virtue and they emphasize that if courage in some of its expressions may require basic training, it cannot emanate from cultivation or indoctrination.”¹⁸²

The grace of God in Christ is the basis for Christian hope. But sport provides a gym where Kateb’s “test of character” can be rehearsed and this hope, developed. If hope was a muscle that was given to every disciple, how would we exercise it? In sport, it would mean grinding it out in training, getting coached on our strengths and exposed of our bad habits and compromises, and rebuilding and tweaking the growing edges. It is true that tragedies, illness and other trials in life could also be a testing ground, but anyone in their right mind would not desire to reproduce such experiences. But sport, when considered in its full spectrum of elements such as such as play, teamwork, mentoring and coaching, competition, along with the aspects we have considered, positions it in a unique place in life.

Much of former Navy Seal and decorated ultra-endurance athlete David Goggins’ suffering came in the form of sports and military challenges. Although he now has a powerful story that inspires others and gives them hope, he is far from content. “There is no finish line” in this world, he says.¹⁸³ Courage and hope encapsulates the ethos commonly shared by warriors, athletes and saints: the practice and the effort is everything.

¹⁸² George Kateb, “Courage as a Virtue,” *Social Research* 71, no. 1 (2004): 39-.

¹⁸³ David Goggins, *Can’t Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds* (Lioncrest Publishing, 2018).

All meaning is found in the effort and suffering, since complete mastery or “arrival,” is just not possible in this life. In kindred spirit, Paul shares his own hopes that drive all his physical earthly efforts: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on...” (Phil 3:12-14).

4.7 Courage and love

After twenty-years as a Navy Seal and sixty ultra-endurance races to his resume, Goggins began to experience a physical breakdown of his body, without a clear diagnosis. He describes the sharp edges in his demeanor throughout most of his life originating from a disdain for who he was. Lying in his hospital bed, as if preparing for death, “Goggins says, “I was looking for peace but it takes war to get there.”¹⁸⁴ He confesses that the near-death experience ultimately helped him arrive at facing God, forgiveness and self-acceptance.

As a result of their sin of eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were overcome with the shame of their own body, which was originally perceived as beautiful and “good.” They used a covering to disguise their image (Gen 3:7). When God called out to Adam, he responded “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Gen 3:10). They covered themselves from each other and from God. The Gospel is the means by which the covered and shameful

¹⁸⁴ Goggins.

individual is invited to God's presence, exposed and full of shame, only to be clothed in new garments of acceptance and grace. "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me in the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Is 61:10).

Drawing from nearly thirty years of working with gang members in the most troubled area in Los Angeles, Greg Boyle writes,

"Yet, it's precisely within the contour of one's shame that one is summoned to wholeness. 'Even there, even there,' Psalm 39 tells us— even in the darkest place, we are known— yes, even there. My own falsely self-assertive and harmful, unfree ego gets drawn into the expansive heart of God. It is precisely in the light of God's vastness and acceptance of me that I can accept the harm I do for what it is"¹⁸⁵

It could be said that the individual's difficulty with self-acceptance is relational to the rejection of God's acceptance. For Boyle, "Recognizing that we are wholly acceptable is God's own truth for us— waiting to be discovered." It is not uncommon to hear of believers giving mental ascent to God's acceptance, only to exclude themselves from the reality of this saving love. This "self-work" is a key aspect of living out the greatest commandment of loving God and loving others.

¹⁸⁵ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (Free Press, 2010). 44.

Spiritual writer, Henri J. Nouwen, believed that self-acceptance was “integrally related to faith in God’s acceptance.”¹⁸⁶ It is not self-acceptance acquired apart from God but something that is possible *because* of God’s love.

“Self-acceptance, for Nouwen, was the result of accepting God’s love expressed most of all through his Son...When we are listening to the voices of the world, we cannot truly accept ourselves, but when we are willing to listen to the voice of God saying through Jesus that we are fully accepted just as we are, then we are free to grow into our truest selves.”¹⁸⁷

Just as Goggins’ journey to peace was riddled with war, so the road to loving God and neighbor is populated with the giants of shame and self-loathing.

For Parker Palmer, there is a war within that represents the ultimate test of self-acceptance. In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, he suggests that incongruence sets in at an early age due to the pressure to fit in to what he calls an “adult pathology.”¹⁸⁸ He speaks of his own childhood where he recognized a clear and growing division emerging between who he was when alone at home and at school. The dualism continued in his life until he acknowledged the destructive nature of the “divided life.” It was essentially a rejection of who he was in order to manufacture who he thought others wanted him to be. Pursuing wholeness requires a willingness to take risks and often involves

¹⁸⁶ Deirdre Madison LaNoue, “Henri J. M. Nouwen and Modern American Spirituality” (Ph.D., Baylor University, 1999).188.

¹⁸⁷ LaNoue. 201-202.

¹⁸⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness : The Journey toward an Undivided Life : Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004).14-15.

courageous acts of aligning our inner person with the public one. It is one way of imagining the journey towards self-acceptance. "Afraid that our inner light will be extinguished or our inner darkness exposed, we hide our true identities from each other. In the process, we become separated from our own souls. We end up living divided lives..."¹⁸⁹

Courage is required to compete in a sport in front of an audience, challenge an enemy in combat, face oneself and ignore the "voices from the world." James Baldwin is right, "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."¹⁹⁰ Love exposes us to many dangers and always carries the threat of disappointment, rejection and betrayal. It makes us vulnerable. It is because love is such a powerful force in life that it requires courage to give it flesh and blood. In a risk-averse society, those who have taken their body and minds through risky endeavors in sport will be familiar with the idea that courage in such situations yields rewards. They also understand that risk is always a part of growth and success in any field. Every athlete pushing themselves in training risks injury, failure, and even financial hardship. Moreover, they risk the assaults on their ego when underperforming as well as the humiliation that may come from the criticism of others. Such is why the public gym is an uncomfortable place for many. But if we are paralyzed by such social norms, how will

¹⁸⁹ Palmer. 4.

¹⁹⁰ Boyle, *Barking to the Choir*. C7, 04:04:25.

we ever develop the audacity to love our neighbors and forgive our worst enemies?

Worse yet, where will we find the courage it takes to return to God each day, despite the bags of shame, disappointment and self-loathing we may bring with us?

Self-acceptance is an act of courage, faith, and ultimately love. It is an embrace of God's radical acceptance. Somewhere between the "we" and the "he," in "We love because he first loved us," (1 Jn 4:19) is a transformative and courageous acceptance. Boyle poetically envisages the emergence of a courageous and accepting community among the gang members: "Our sphere has widened, and we find ourselves quite unexpectedly, in a new, expansive location, in a place of endless acceptance and infinite love. We've wandered into God's own 'jurisdiction.'"¹⁹¹ The acceptance of God, ultimately leads to self-acceptance and the acceptance of others. It is how we go from strangers to neighbors to friends. Nouwen writes, "Laying our hearts totally open to God leads to a love of ourselves that enables us to give whole-hearted love to our fellow human beings."¹⁹² It takes courage to believe in God's unconditional love while living in a world that runs on conditional terms, and even more courage to go back to God repeatedly, each time one falls to sin or some enticement leading to shame. In this sense, taking grace into our hands by faith, is an act of supreme courage.

¹⁹¹ Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*. 146.

¹⁹² LaNoue, "Henri J. M. Nouwen and Modern American Spirituality." 216.

Love is the ultimate goal of the Christian life; it is more than a deed or a collection of sophisticated thoughts—it is a way. The path to love requires everything Jesus said it would: self-denial, bearing one’s cross, and the loss of one’s life, figuratively and sometimes literally. “Human suffering has reached its culmination in the Passion of the Christ... it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: *it has been linked to love... which creates Good, drawing it out by means of suffering.*”¹⁹³ This creation of good from suffering, accomplished in the life of Jesus is also pregnant with potential in his disciples. It also requires a high degree of courage to express in perseverance, suffering, and the endurance to finish the “race.”

The biblical picture is compelling. The essential ingredients necessary for living a faithful life as a disciple of Jesus requires courage. This was demonstrated both in the life of Jesus and through his disciples. It remains the pattern for us to follow. The *practice* of faith, hope and love is exactly that: training. They are qualities that grow with repetition and testing in contexts conducive to bringing out brutal honest feedback and opportunity for reengagement. The athletes and saints who has understood the unique role of sport in this endeavor are numerous and diverse, and worthy of the title, “athletes of God.”

¹⁹³ Lixey, *Sport and Christianity*.

5. The Athlete of God

The latest research on sport suggests that it is not just a social mirror but it is a true change agent, as convincingly argued by Terry Shoemaker in his book, *The Prophetic Dimension of Sport*.¹⁹⁴ He presents the prophetic roles of athletes and the social ripple effects they caused by utilizing sport as venue for social commentary. There is Jackie Robinson in baseball, Colin Kaepernick in the National Football League, and the “Black Lives Matter” movement that found footing in the National Basketball League to name a few.

Phil Jackson, the winningest coach of all time in the NBA, with 11 championship rings to name, is a self-identified Zen Christian.¹⁹⁵ He is famously transparent about his Pentecostal Christian roots and his eclectic toolkit of spiritual practices, which have all been a part of his success as an NBA athlete and coach, he also believes that sport is an opportunity to activate greater social change. Describing his time as the coach of the Los Angeles Lakers he writes, “... there’ve been a long series of devastating events centered around Los Angeles. I think that having a basketball team that’s focused, poised, and successful, and that displays a certain amount of gratitude, love, and respect for one another can be a healing force.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Terry Shoemaker, *The Prophetic Dimension of Sport* (Cham, SWITZERLAND: Springer, 2018). 12

¹⁹⁵ Phil Jackson, *More Than a Game*, Kindle Edition (Seven Stories Press, 2001).

Beyond his professional accomplishments, Jackson's story involves a number of his former players exploring spirituality, meditation and even revitalizing their Christian faith as a result of his coaching methods and influence.¹⁹⁷ The following athletes represent additional and diverse examples of the prophetic witness faith-based athletes and organizations bring to an enterprise as heavily commercialized as professional sports. They stand apart in values, reputation, and mission among their peers. In more ways than one, they are a voice as well as an image of what God may be saying and doing in the midst of the glitz, glamor, vanity, and humanity imbued in sports.

Liddell said in an interview, "I want you to compare faith with running in a race. It's hard, requires concentration of will, energy of soul...Everyone runs in his or her own way. But where does the power come from to finish the race? From within...commit yourself to the Lord and he'll see you through to the end."¹⁹⁸ Contrary to the belief that God would be uninterested in the outcome of sport, since it is considered as only entertainment by some, the missionary Olympian brings God into the center of his

¹⁹⁶ Jackson. Kindle Location 2449.

¹⁹⁷ Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*, Kindle Edition (Hachette Books, 2012).

¹⁹⁸ O'Gorman, *Saving Sport*. 18.

competitive world. The man famous for giving up an opportunity to compete on Sunday, did not separate sport and faith or sacred and secular.

Perhaps we need new word-pictures and metaphors to think of this following Jesus experience. Indeed, Christian spiritual formation is rudderless without clearly articulated images of what the end state looks like. Such is why biblical metaphors, allegories, and parables continue to shape how we think and speak about the Christian life. Jesus is envisaged as the “Good Shepherd,” “Friend of Sinners,” “The Lamb of God,” “The Lion of Judah,” among many other things. How about his disciples. Is the follower of Jesus a sheep? Is she a daughter? A servant? A warrior? An athlete? She is all those things and more, just as Jesus is. Perhaps limiting our vision of following Jesus to a certain set of normative practices is at the heart of the problem. In a kingdom you have warriors, priests, butchers, carpenters, artisans, and as well as farmers. Such things are not merely professions but identity forming cultural associations in life. They influence how one serves God, relates to the community, and may even effect the way in which one worships, prays, and lives out their spirituality.

Not everyone will or can be an athlete of God. But as we have seen, the athlete is a compelling metaphor for the Christian. Thanks to the popularity and influence of John Bunyan’s classic¹⁹⁹, the pilgrim is one of the most well-known images that come to mind

¹⁹⁹ The Pilgrim’s Progress is considered the first English Novel. Since its publication in 1678, the book has never been out of print. It has been translated into more than 200 languages. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/23/100-best-novels-pilgrims-progress>

when thinking of the spiritual life. In recent years, the NFL's Tim Tebow became for some a modern "pilgrim" like character in the football arena, as he explicitly tied the physical challenges of competition with his Christian calling and mission.²⁰⁰ Tebow's groundbreaking role in the public sphere, as athlete-evangelist, was a watershed moment in how America thinks of ministry. One journalist writes, "The preaching of the Gospel--the living of the Gospel--is moving from pulpit to platform, from church to culture. The next Billy Graham, if there could be such a thing, may come not from the ranks of traditional preachers or ministers but from sports or entertainment."²⁰¹

Tebow's story was soon followed by another "athlete of God," in what is truly a miraculous story of Harvard's Jeremy Lin, who was not even drafted to the NBA upon graduation.²⁰² After several short-term contracts that got him a seat at the team bench, he found his way to superstardom with the New York Knicks with multiple decisive game-winning performances that led to a team winning streak that is now known as

²⁰⁰ Jon Meacham, Elizabeth Dias, and Sean Gregory, "Tebow's Testimony," *Time* 179, no. 2 (January 16, 2012): 40–42.

²⁰¹ Meacham, Dias, and Gregory.

²⁰² Daniel Burke, "N.Y. Knicks' Jeremy Lin Seen as 'Taiwanese Tebow,'" *The Christian Century*, March 21, 2012, Biography In Context.

“Linsanity.”²⁰³ The “Taiwanese Tebow,” not only broke ethnic boundaries by becoming the first American-born NBA player of Asian descent, like Tebow, he saw his career as a platform for sharing the gospel and was not afraid to declare it publicly.²⁰⁴ His Twitter account description says it all: “To know Him is to want Him more.” Followed by an avatar of Jesus telling a young man, “No, I’m not just talking about Twitter. I literally want you to follow me.”²⁰⁵

In mixed martial arts (MMA), numerous fighters infuse theological significance to competing in the ring.²⁰⁶ Benson Henderson walks to every fight with Christian music and openly talks about his faith and the connection it has to competition and life. Jon Jones, considered by some the greatest MMA fighter of all time, has “Philippians 4:13” tattooed on his shoulder and chest.²⁰⁷ This gravitation towards a physical spirituality extends beyond individual stories. Xtreme Ministries combines church and gym. Their motto is “Where Feet, Fist, and Faith Collide and they also run a “Vacation Fight School”

²⁰³ Grant Hughes, “Timeline of Jeremy Lin’s Rise to Linsanity and Journey to Where He Is Today,” Bleacher Report, accessed December 16, 2018, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1747434-timeline-of-jeremy-lins-rise-to-linsanity-and-journey-to-where-he-is-today>.

²⁰⁴ Burke, “N.Y. Knicks’ Jeremy Lin Seen as ‘Taiwanese Tebow.’”

²⁰⁵ Burke.

²⁰⁶ Justine Greve, “Jesus Didn’t Tap: Masculinity, Theology, and Ideology in Christian Mixed Martial Arts,” *Religion and American Culture* 24, no. 2 (2014): 141–85.

²⁰⁷ Greve.151-2.

to teach kids martial arts and morality.”²⁰⁸ Brandon Beals, calls himself the “Fight Pastor” at Canyon Creek Church, near Seattle, Washington, where he teaches the idea that their church is a bridge between religion and MMA. They even host short-term Warrior Camps and Warrior Colleges.²⁰⁹

By bringing their faith into the world of sport, these athletes of God opened the door to much criticism, attack, and suffering of various kinds. They lost opportunities to progress in their career, experienced betrayal in the locker room, and were often the subject of public ridicule. And yet, their unwillingness to compromise who they were, as both athletes and saints and their resolve to compete for the glory of God serves as a prophetic witness against the self-serving, over commercialized profit-driven landscape of modern day sports. Their lives remind us that there is something primitively satisfying in sport. Such stories highlight its unique connection to the experience of bodily movement, creative flow, competition, suffering, training, and transcendence, things that reflect aspects of who our Creator made us to be and our desire to live them out.

Not all appreciate the infusion of such divine and human narratives in sport. However, with the popularity of sport as a mission critical training curriculum in the military, opportunities to facilitate this connection between sport and the Divine are

²⁰⁸ Greve. 151.

²⁰⁹ Greve. 152.

plentiful. This is where bridging sport to spirituality is important, since it creates a broadly applicable construct that a pluralistic environment can participate in.

5.1 The athlete warrior

Sport metaphors and locker room culture permeates the environment in certain military communities such as United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF), the United States Marine Corps (USMC), and other groups within the Department of Defense (DOD) that earn their living by warfighting at the “tip of the spear.” In 2012, the DOD formally authorized the funding and recruiting of 30 sport psychologists to import a professional sports model to the training of USSOF operatives.²¹⁰ This weaponizing of kinesiology involves equipping the “tactical athlete”, with tools to maximize mission success with applications from physiology, biomechanics, neuroscience, or psychology.²¹¹

5.1.1 The perfect couple

The sport military connection is not exclusive to the SOF community, and has a long history. As far back as the 1920s, Douglas McArthur, then the Superintendent of West Point, instituted athletics programs as a strategy to better train and prepare future

²¹⁰ Michael L. Butterworth, *Sport and Militarism : Contemporary Global Perspectives*, Routledge Research in Sport, Culture and Society (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017). 31.

²¹¹ Butterworth. 36.

officers for war.²¹² It was a time when “American planners began to raise the mass army that would ultimately fight the Second World War, the design of the sports program through which soldiers and sailors were trained and entertained reflected new thinking, not only about the practical purposes of such a sports program, but the philosophical purposes behind the creation of an American masculine ideal through sport.²¹³ Among allied forces, boxing served a central role in determining the superiority of a nation’s warriors among the group.²¹⁴ The Army-Navy football game represents one of the oldest rivalries and encapsulates the competitive spirit, high regard for toughness, teamwork, and winning that both the military and sport embrace.²¹⁵ As America’s “national pastime,” baseball has had a pivotal role among soldiers in numerous wars since the Civil War.²¹⁶ The singing of the National Anthem or “God Bless America” in every game, military jets flying over before the start of the Super Bowl, and many other

²¹² Wanda Ellen Wakefield, *Playing to Win : Sports and the American Military, 1898-1945*, SUNY Series on Sport, Culture, and Social Relations (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). 36.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Wakefield, *Playing to Win*. 80.

²¹⁵ Mark Carnes, *The Columbia History of Post-World War II America* (New York, UNITED STATES: Columbia University Press, 2007). 135.

²¹⁶ Butterworth, *Sport and Militarism*.

themes of patriotism in sporting events reveal just how deeply embedded the two institutions really are.

Today, this long marriage between these partners has given rise to programs such as the *Warrior Human Performance Center*, part of the University of Pittsburgh's Neuromuscular Research Laboratory, the most notable of the institutionalized military sport science research and performance centers.²¹⁷ Conceived as a result of the institutional and operational interests of the USMC and SOF, the center focuses on utilizing biomechanical, musculoskeletal, and psychological protocols to improve injury prevention and mission-specific holistic human performance.²¹⁸ Moreover, the three service academies, United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, which trains officers for the Army, the United States Naval Academy (USNA), which trains officers for the Navy, and the United States Air Force Academy (USAF), which trains officers for the Air Force, all require high performance both in academics as well as in athletics for admission.²¹⁹ As a result, much of our leadership in the military

²¹⁷ Butterworth. 37.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ John Cawley and Johanna Catherine Maclean, "The Consequences of Rising Youth Obesity for U.S. Military Academy Admissions," *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 35, no. 1 (2013): 32–51.

come from athletic backgrounds and utilize the military's general fitness standards to leverage sport and athletic challenges as a way to strengthen unit cohesion, ensure physical readiness, and help develop mental grit.

It is no surprise then, when I look back at all the service members I have observed, counseled and served with, the ones that have demonstrated higher performance and a greater resiliency to the stressors of military life were more often than not, athletes of varying levels. While plenty of other factors shape a person's performance in the military, such as family history, social circles, belief systems, to name a few, the sheer depth of overlap between sport and military culture provides a significant advantage for those who have a sport background. This realization, that sport and warrior DNAs have cross-pollinated for years, has fueled this research and resulted in several ministry initiatives that I have implemented as a chaplain.

5.2 The warrior chaplain

When I was serving in Presbyterian congregations, the dominant learning model for the majority of our members resembled the classroom style. They valued book study, and were conditioned to having pastors with advanced degrees, many of which had Ph.Ds. Hence, preaching and teaching were typically the primary means of shaping and guiding the flock. Such opportunities are almost nonexistent in my current context. As a

chaplain to some of our most elite military warfighters, I found that the language they related to most is athletic, and the learning environment they trust is experiential and tactile. Lofty ideas and philosophy rarely garner interest when they have minimal bearing on actual problems that could be solved. Before discussing some of the relevant ministry initiatives that I have been a part of, a brief elaboration of my observations and experience as well as the impact on my philosophy of ministry they have had is in order.

As a US Navy Chaplain, I have taken an oath to faithfully carry out my work to Provide for those of my own faith, Facilitate the free exercise of religion to those of other faiths, Care for all, and Advise my leadership on matters of morale and welfare.

Evangelism is not in my wheelhouse nor is pastoring, in the traditional sense. Some see this view as a compromise, as I've met plenty of chaplains who say they are basically missionaries, undercover. I find that problematic, since it seems like a compromise in integrity. I carry out my duties in the described manner trusting that as I build credibility and relational inroads, God will do meaningful things both in my life and in the lives of the people I serve.

I will never forget this one Sailor on my ship. He was burley and intimidating. He looked like an ex-convict. I made it my business to go talk to him, although everyone else seemed to be avoiding him. We slowly built up rapport and he became a regular visitor to my office. I got to know about his marriage troubles and struggles with post traumatic stress. A month later he randomly walked into my office and said, "Chaps,

you need to know that you saved a Sailor's life a month ago." I was puzzled, and asked, "what do you mean?" He went on to tell me that the day I first walked up to him and introduced myself, he was planning to jump off the ship and kill himself. Needless to say, I was speechless and thanked God that my impulse to greet him was used in such timely manner.

The providential orchestration of God in this story represents much of how I believe God works in the Chaplain Corps. As we busy ourselves serving in ways that are not necessarily religious or pastoral, he is leading chaplains into random relational spaces to help, encourage, and sometimes even save a person from the darkest places. Then there are those never have the opportunity or impulse to provide feedback only to share years later how a chaplain helped them. I have heard a random neighbor tell me, upon finding out that I was a Navy Chaplain, "I love chaplains. A chaplain saved my life when I first came into the Navy." The F-18 pilot was referring to a time of failure in his career when he also considered suicide and was encouraged by a chaplain that recognized his needs. In the spirit of the Good Samaritan, I find it fulfilling enough that people are helped, whether they come to faith through me or not. While I will be grateful when the latter does happen, it has not been the view of my primary calling in the military.

My experience has shown me that if I am sincere with people and demonstrate a genuine concern for all, without compromising who I am and what I stand for (it's hard

to do since I wear a cross on my collar), then opportunities to impact, mentor and on some occasions, guide someone to faith presents itself. Service members are free to ask questions about any religion or pursue conversion, if they would like. I just can't initiate proselytizing. My effort then, involves exploring ways to weave spiritual fiber into what is a warfighting machine built for one purpose: building the strongest weapon and destroying the enemy.

In this most dehumanizing business called war, our role is to "humanize" the human weapons by the means of connecting service members with God, with loved ones, and with themselves. Among the many ways chaplains can accomplish this, merging the language of sport with the construct of spirituality and/or religion, presents fresh opportunities to help address prominent issues in the military related to resiliency, ethical failures, trauma, moral injury, and loss of purpose.

With one Marine Corps unit I had the privilege of creating a Spiritual Fitness program that incorporated mountain biking as well as rock climbing. Both events pushed the participants physically while simultaneously injecting reflective questions on the personal choice to suffer and the voluntary commitment to stay in the "fight." When conducting grueling hikes in challenging conditions with packs weighing as much as 70-80 pounds, some younger Marines would breakdown. You could see the "quit" in their faces, long before their body has given up. The program offered a way to draw from deeper resources or in their absence, helped construct new spiritual frameworks.

The training introduced ideas of voluntary suffering as means to help the struggling Marines build up inner resolve, as well as elements of play, and flow. Moreover, the impact that a person's beliefs, morals and values have on operational performance, relationships and other areas of life were discussed in depth. Some of the concepts we have explored in this study were first explored in the field, albeit, often haphazardly, since the operational tempo and demands of training cycles often overruled other priorities.

Currently, I am preparing to roll out a training called mPeak, a program based out of the University of California at San Diego, which uses mindfulness techniques to train human performance among members of the Department of Homeland Securities (DHS), including border security personnel from Immigration Customs Enforcement agency (ICE).²²⁰ While its packaged as mindfulness performance, there are components that touch on very human and emotional intelligence aspects of performance that coincide with much of what I address in counseling sessions and even disciplinary issues the leadership has to manage.

I trust that the opportunities to leverage sport as a means to help people grow spiritually will only grow in the military. Rather than sit in the sidelines and watch this boat take off, which some will do because of their suspicion for generic spirituality, I

²²⁰ Information based on personal contacts with the programs director, Pete Kerchmer. General information on mPeak can be found on the UCSD website: <http://mbpti.org/programs/mpeak/mpeak-3day-intensive/>

continue to actively pursue ways to use it as a context to help and strengthen people in ways beyond physical fitness.

For those who are more open to faith, I hope to introduce a program called F3, which stands for Fitness, Fellowship and Faith.²²¹ It is a Nationwide gathering of men (they also have a version for women) who come together early in the morning for a group workout mixed in with what they call the “circle of trust,” the part that brings in devotion and prayer. The daily workouts are augmented by a weekly social, or fellowship gathering. F3 is an example of a number other fitness oriented initiatives aimed at military and first-responder types, who desire connection with both people and God in a more holistically engaging manner than the typical potluck gatherings. While I don’t see anything wrong with such social opportunities, the demand signal for those who are serving our Nation and our communities in what are highly physical and emotionally demanding areas of service, the “G rated” version of the spiritual life can be hard to relate to. This could be the case for a combat veteran as much as an ER trauma nurse, and others who routinely operate in the fringes of human experiences. For the sake of such ministry opportunities, and as stewards of a God-given body, our Western Christian communities would be wise to become more active and literate in the fitness and sport world.

²²¹ Phyllis Johnson, “F3 Nation Is Changing the Way Local Men Stay Fit,” *Virginian-Pilot*, n.d., accessed February 24, 2019.

6. Conclusion

Thomas is right in saying that the Church is “soft.”²²² The rest of America is, too. The problem is so pervasive it is effecting the military, with the service academies experiencing a seismic shift in admission eligible candidates due to the overwhelming percentage of applicants who are obese.²²³ President Kennedy saw a similar social problem during his time in office and published two articles: “Our Unfit Youth” and the other in *Sports Illustrated*, “The Vigor We Need.”²²⁴ Soon after, leadership in the military and college sports led the charge with a “no pain, no gain” psychology behind them and gave rise to a movement keen on demonstrating America’s toughness to the world.²²⁵ It is where sport, again, played a critical role in social change.²²⁶ If sport was the mechanism for change, aimed at altering the mindset of laziness to vigilance among athletes and warriors, is there an alternative to combating the softness among followers of Jesus? In other words, however we may want to distinguish a different purpose, win, and source of the Christian’s life and vision in this world, softness is at the end of the day, just softness.

²²² Thomas, *Every Body Matters*.

²²³ Cawley and Maclean, “The Consequences of Rising Youth Obesity for U.S. Military Academy Admissions.” 32.

²²⁴ Carnes, *The Columbia History of Post-World War II America*. 136.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

Is it possible that the Christian life in America is too comfortable, without challenges, and mitigates the need for courage? Perhaps it is overrun with challenges, except they are all trivial and distract from the real issues that need attention. The reality of a suburban American Christianity should generate dissonance in followers of Jesus. It is because from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is a book replete with wars, conflicts, and challenges. The picture is starkly different than the image we would draw of contemporary spiritual life. Images and narratives that warriors and athletes alike, find deep resonance with. We have the right material; we just need to update and contextualize it.

Jesus' own birth precedes genocide (Matt 2:16). His enemy was real, but not necessarily in the form of a person (Mk 1:13). But he speaks of the devil within Judas (Jn 6:70) as well as Peter (Matt 16:23). The critique to his sleeping disciples for sleeping when they should have been fighting in prayer (Matt 26:36-46), his arduous and probably near-death experience fasting for forty days in the wilderness before the official launch of his ministry (Matt 4:1-11), points to how he fought the spiritual battle that Paul speaks about, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). As "remembered" by the Lord's Supper, his victory was accomplished through the ultimate sacrifice of his body (Jn 19:30).

While James says no man can “tame the tongue,” he doesn’t say anything about the other body parts (Ja 3:8). The body is much more significant in shaping our spiritual lives than we are aware. Among the images of godly archetypes, we have tattooed on our minds from sermons and studies, the athlete of God should certainly be one of them to serve as reminder that the sacred and secular overlap, the body, mind and spirit are one, and the body is the only means by which we can actually generate motion towards growth and change as a disciple of Christ. The athlete of God represents the individual taking the word “strength,” from the command, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your hearts, soul, mind and with all your strength,” (Mk 12:30) seriously and physically.

6.2 Recommendations for further study

There are several considerations that effect sport and fitness that we did not have room to adequately discuss. These include diet, nutrition, classic ascetic practices, particularly fasting and our eating culture in general, and how they reflect and affect spiritual formation. The connection between suffering in sport and healing is another area with little research available but ample opportunity for exploration. As anecdotally mentioned in this study, athletes enduring suffering in pursuit of healing through rigorous endurance sports are a very common phenomenon. A recent example includes an Iraq war veteran suffering from PTSD that bought a bicycle shortly after her suicide

ideation, to ride it across the country.²²⁷ Sarah Lee rode 4,500 miles to save herself. She comments, “I basically bought this bicycle rather than end my life.”²²⁸ A look at the Ironman event alone, with a view of establishing spiritual themes and connections would uncover insights rich with implications for how sport can aid healing on multiple levels.

²²⁷ <https://www.bicycling.com/rides/a23116497/sarah-lee-veteran-bike-ride/>

²²⁸ Ibid.

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Biography

Mark Jungin Won was born in Seoul, South Korea on December 29, 1975. He immigrated with his family to the U.S. and lived in Queen, New York from 1983. In 1997, he earned his Bachelor of Art in English from the University of New York at Albany (SUNY) and his Master of Divinity from Regent University in 2005. His publications include, "Are Combat Sports Spiritual" for the *Marine Corps Gazette* (Nov 2017), "American Lessons", *The Covenant Companion* (Jan 2017), and "Wholeness through Hospitality", *Inheritance Magazine* (July 2017).

He has been serving as a Navy Chaplain since 2011. He is currently stationed in Little Creek, VA, where he lives with his wife Sarah, and his children Paul, Stephen, Samuel and Anna.