

“The Olympic Spirit”

a reflection
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Sunday, August 12, 2012
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

Later today, the 30th Summer Olympics of the modern era draw to a close. After 16 days of striving, in the words of the Olympic motto, to be “Faster, Higher, Stronger” than each other – athletes from all around the globe will set aside the competition, put down their flags, and put their arms around one another, to celebrate the memories they have created, of the London Olympics. As the flame is extinguished and the flags are lowered, the world – sadly – will return to normal.

Tonight, after 16 *nights* of way-too-little sleep, striving to watch just *some* of the absolutely astounding 5,535 hours of televised and internet-streamed action, in more than 300 events – tonight I will reach the finish line of my own personal marathon, much as the men’s marathoners in London did this morning – while I watched, cereal bowl and frozen waffles in hand.

For most of you, I suspect, this Olympic fortnight, as the British might call it, may not have been as intensive as mine. I recognize that many Unitarian Universalists are not sports fans. Yet even the most disinterested among us has probably, in the past couple of weeks, been touched, in some way great or small, by the Olympic spirit on display in London – because there’s something *about* the Olympic Games that transcends sports, in a way no other athletic competition can, or ever has. On a scale both grand and incredibly intimate, the Olympics lift up, every couple of years, for the entire world to see, all that is worthy of celebration – all that is great and wonderful – about the human condition.

Almost daily, during these Olympics, I have been amazed by the stunning, record-setting performances of folks like Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt. Like others, I cannot help but feel a bit of patriotic pride – though it is mixed with a certain sense of sheepishness – at the breezy, self-assured dominance of the U.S men’s basketball team, which at this very moment is, I am sure, barely breaking a sweat as they coast to another inevitable gold medal. But what really makes my heart leap, during any Olympics, are the instances of courage and heroism, especially in defeat. “The most important thing in the Olympic Games,” said the

man who revived them for the modern era, French historian Pierre de Coubertin, “is not to win, but to *take part*, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. What is essential,” he continued, “is not to have conquered, but to have fought well.”

His words have summed up the Olympic spirit now for more than a century. They are what Rudyard Kipling refers to as “meeting with triumph and disaster, and treating those two impostors just the same.” And as usual, there has been no shortage of this kind of heroism over the past two weeks. At the top of the collage on the cover of your morning bulletin, is the photo of one such athlete – Chinese hurdler Liu Xiang, who, four years ago, tore his Achilles tendon during an Olympic race on his home soil. He has rehabilitated, and trained tenaciously, ever since, simply to get back to the Olympics, and have one more chance. But last week, he ruptured the same tendon, on the very first hurdle of his race.

After tumbling to the track and writhing in pain for some time, Liu struggled to his feet, refused a wheelchair ride to the dressing room – and then hopped, on his one good foot, *all the way to the finish line*, bending over to kiss the Olympic rings on the final hurdle. He was carried off the track, in triumph, by the other runners, as tens of thousands of people rose to their feet in the stadium and cheered.

That, to me, is the Olympic spirit. That, to me, is the *human* spirit, at its very best.

And the thing about the Olympics is – this kind of stuff seems to happen, over and over again, just about every day. In that way, it is much like life itself – if only we will notice. In a semifinal heat of the men’s 4-by-400 meter relay (in which the top two teams advance to the finals), lead-off runner Manteo Mitchell of the United States actually *broke his leg* – he said he knew it was broken, because he not only felt it, but heard it snap, even over the roar of the crowd. Mitchell *ran* the remaining 100-plus meters of the race with a broken leg, in order to hand the baton off to his U.S. teammate. His friends then made up enough ground, the rest of the race, to qualify for the finals – in which they later won a silver medal, as Mitchell cheered them on from the sidelines, wearing a cast.

Yes, the Olympics are a *lot* like life!

But both those stories are of Olympians who came to London with legitimate dreams of victory. There are many more stories of people for whom simply *competing* in the Olympics was, truly, their ultimate accomplishment.

One such athlete was 35-year-old rower Djibo Issaka, from Niger – a landlocked nation in the Sahara Desert. Issaka, who had never even *been in a boat* prior to this spring, trained for a few months in a fishing boat in Tunisia as he pursued his unlikely dream of becoming an Olympian. He actually fell out of the boat in his first practice in London. Then, in each of three different rowing races he competed

in, Issaka struggled even to row straight, much less to reach the finish line – yet reach the finish line he did ... long after all the other rowers had packed up and left.

But something strange happened to Issaka, on his meandering way to the finish: Thousands of people began to cheer him on, to honor his effort, to encourage him not to quit. His fame, and his popularity, grew with each successive race – in each of which, needless to say, he finished dead last. By the end of the Games, Issaka had become a national hero back home in Niger, and he was so popular in London that one British tabloid had a ceremony to award him a special medal for his efforts.

So far I have mentioned only male athletes – but this Olympics was truly one of gender equality. For one thing, it was the first time both men and women represented *each and every* competing country – and women figured prominently in many of the most inspiring story lines. There was the dramatic way in which the U.S. women's soccer team won gold, and of course the dominance of the U.S. women's basketball team. There was the impressive, four-gold medal performance of 17-year-old U.S. swimmer Missy Franklin – who never seemed to stop smiling, who spoke frequently of her crush on Justin Bieber, and who seemed completely sincere when, after finishing fourth in one of her races, just one one-hundredth of a second short of a medal, said without hesitation in response to an interviewer's question, "I don't think *any* swim in the Olympic Games is a disappointment!"

Baron de Coubertin would be proud.

And of course, we have all hear of the "Fab Five" – the American women's gymnastics team, which won the all-around gold medal and several other individual medals – but I want you to leave the sanctuary this morning having heard, as well, of five *other* fabulous women. None of them came anywhere *near* a medal, yet they won a more important victory – a victory much more significant, in the march of human history.

I am referring to five Muslim women, from different countries, who defied their culture, who defied all the odds – who defied ridicule, hatred, even death threats – merely to come to London, and compete in the Olympics. These five women – and I hope I will do justice to pronouncing their names, because they each did justice to the human spirit and the spirit of freedom – these five women broke barriers even the great Jesse Owens never faced.

Tahmina Kohstani of Afghanistan – who is also pictured on the front of your bulletin – competed in the 100-meter dash, wearing the traditional Muslim hijab head-covering, and exposing only her face and hands. For two years back home in Afghanistan, as she trained for her Olympic moment, she had to pass through jeering mobs. She had to be physically protected by her coach, every time she simply went outdoors, on a practice run.

Wojdan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shahkrhani – just 16 years old – represented Saudi Arabia in judo. She was the first female Olympic athlete ever, from her country – where Muslim clerics had publicly vilified her for bringing shame to herself, her family, and to the kingdom by engaging in physical contact, in front of men. Due to the nature of her sport, she could not wear a hijab in the competition – instead she was allowed to wear a tight-fitting black cap to cover her head. Her match lasted little more than a minute, before she was eliminated by a much superior opponent – yet she, too, proved victorious, in a much more important contest.

Noor Hussain Al-Malki, from Qatar, donned a maroon headscarf that matched the long sleeves and long leggings of her track outfit, as she ran in her sprint race. Like the Chinese hurdler Liu, she injured herself during the race – but told the media afterward that her accomplishment – simply being the first female athlete from her conservative Muslim country – was well worth all that she had endured.

Shinoona Salah al-Habsi, from Oman, and Fatima Suleiman Dahman of Yemen, both competed in the same preliminary heat in one track race – and both, failed to advance to the next round. Yet the picture of the two of them running down the home stretch – one on either side of a white woman named Borg, who was racing in the lane between them – was an image from London truly worth savoring. Though it was “only” a preliminary race – in my mind, it was a one for the ages.

Yes, this was an Olympics of groundbreaking diversity. There was all of England, cheering for a dark-skinned man named Mohammed, adopting him as their national hero after he won the 5,000 and 10,000 meter races. There was American Gabby Douglas – now a household name, in America – becoming the first African-American to win an Olympic gymnastics gold. There was Kirsty Coventry, a white woman, carrying the flag of *Zimbabwe* in the Opening Ceremonies. There was Cuban-born gymnast Danell Leyva, representing the United States, winning a bronze medal. There were Muslim runners, kneeling on the ground in prayer after finishing their races. There was Britain’s own Jessica Ennis, daughter of a dark-skinned Jamaican father and a white-skinned English mother, winning the heptathlon – then gathering up all of her opponents – all of them – to take a victory lap around the cheering London stadium, *together*.

And then – there was Oscar Pistorius. Surely by now everyone has heard the inspiring story of Pistorius, who is also featured on the cover of today’s bulletin – the first so-called non-able-bodied athlete ever to compete in the Olympics. Born without bones in his lower legs, Pistorius had both of his legs amputated below the knees before his first birthday. But as he puts it, “You can either be disabled by the disabilities you have, or you can be abled by the abilities you have.”

And Pistorius has abilities in spades – among them speed, strength, and heart – and early on in the track competition, he achieved his own Olympic dream of reaching the semifinals in the 400-meter dash – making him one of the top 16 runners at that distance *in the world*. Think of it: A double-amputee, who is one of the top runners in the world.

But there was still more for Pistorius to accomplish. This weekend, he actually ran in an Olympic finals – and anchored the South African relay team to an eighth place finish.

It is that kind of human triumph over our limitations, over our fears, over obstacles set before us by others, and by nature – that has always made sports, and the Olympics in particular, a metaphor for our lives. And when you consider that we can – as rivals, as warring and war-making nations, as cultures and societies built as much on mistrust and fear as on cooperation – when you consider that we periodically can, for a fortnight, come together as one human family to – quite frankly – *celebrate life*, create community, and seek justice – when we look at the Olympics, we see what is possible, in human relations.

I began watching the Olympics, as a fan of sports, when I was just nine years old. Some of my most treasured memories of my mother involve the two of us sitting together, in front of a small black-and-white television, sharing the *color* and pageantry, the symbolism and the human drama, of the Olympics. She taught me well how to tear up and get a lump in my throat when someone, perhaps even someone from another country than my own, does something truly remarkable, pushing the limits of human possibility.

These past two weeks, with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat, like my mother before me, I have cherished watching – with my son – the likes of Oscar Pistorius and Michael Phelps, of Tahmina Kohstani and Misty May Treanor – doing just that – extending the boundaries, of the possible. What an inspiration each of these, and countless other Olympic athletes, were to us – both those who won gold, and those who didn't even finish, yet nonetheless did the best that was humanly possible, *for them*. What an inspiration they all were.

I know that tonight, when the Olympic flame at last is extinguished, in that huge chalice on the other side of the Atlantic, I will be remembering my mother. I will be grateful, counting my blessings, to be with my own family now. And I will be carrying in my heart – into the week ahead, and into the years to come – memories, inspiration, and lessons learned about the *human* spirit, from the Olympic spirit.

From me, to you – Namaste!