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Christianity, Sport and Disability: A Case Study of the Role of Long-Distance Running in the Life of a Father and his Son who is Congenitally Blind and has Profound Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative case study was to explore the role of sport (long-distance running) in the lives of a father and his son who is congenitally blind and has profound intellectual disabilities. Drawing on the works of Jean Vanier, Stanley Hauerwas, Henri Nouwen and John Hull, the major themes explored are relational and religious trust, suffering, sacrificial love, embodiment and blindness. A series of one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the father (and mother) concerned and the resultant transcripts analysed using thematic content analysis. Locating the lived experiences of the interview respondents at the centre of the analysis, findings demonstrate that sport is an invaluable means of physical, psychological and spiritual development which has the potential to act as a “counter-narrative” and “prophetic incarnational message” to the commercialised world of sport.

Key Words: long-distance running; father-son relationship; intellectual disabilities and blindness; prophetic incarnational message.

Introduction

“Dad, when I am running it feels like I’m not even handicapped”

Rick Hoyt of *Team Hoyt*¹

“To be disabled is tragic enough but also to be excluded totally from the pleasures of physical recreation and sport is to be doubly unfortunate”

Sir Roger Bannister (1977: 64)²

During the last two decades there has been a growing interest in the relationship between sport and Christianity, evidenced in a developing corpus of related publications (e.g., Parry, Nesti and Watson, 2011), conferences, seminars, research centres and the birth of academic journals³. However, a recent theological and psychological analysis of “athletic identity” (Watson, 2011) has identified that apart from a small number of publications (Watson, 2012a,b; O’Keefe, 2006) and Papal addresses to Olympic athletes with disabilities, by the late John Paul II (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2006), there has been little, if any, theological reflection on disability sport⁴ from sport scholars or theologians.

This exploratory case study will examine the role of sport (long-distance running) in the life journey and relationship between a father and his son, the latter of whom has profound intellectual disabilities and is congenitally blind. The paucity of empirical research on sports persons with visual impairment (Macbeth, 2009), coupled with the fact that the literature on intellectual disabilities in sport that has only recently begun to gather momentum (e.g., Patterson and Peg, 2009; Siperstein, Kersh and Bardon, 2007), further demonstrates the need for studies of this nature. In order to set the scene and provide a conceptual and narrative framework, we begin with a brief analysis of relevant theological themes in relation to disability sport.

Disability Sport: Some Theological Reflections

As Watts (2008) has noted the Christian tradition has had relatively little to say on the challenging topic of human disability and in particular, intellectual disability and blindness.⁵ Indeed, the

¹ This quote is taken from the front cover of the book, *It’s Only a Mountain: Dick and Rick Hoyt, Men of Iron* (Nall, 2002). *Team Hoyt* are a father-son (the son has disabilities) team not unlike the participants of this study.

² Cited in Howe (2008: 1).

³ For a comprehensive overview of these developments, see Watson and Parker’s (2012) review of literature.

⁴ In America the term “Adapted Physical Activity” is often used synonymously with “disability sport”.

⁵ Arguably the writings of John Hull (e.g., 2001, 1992), are the most insightful on this topic.

Christian perspective on such matters, has at times been mixed and in the past decidedly negative; for example, some aspects Martin Luther's theology during the Reformation period. More recently, however, the late Pope John Paul II (2000) and various theologians (e.g., Brock and Swinton, 2012; Hauerwas and Vanier, 2009; Yong, 2007) have begun a dialogue on this important topic, emphasizing the absolute dignity and worth of all human persons, regardless of physical and/or intellectual capacities due to foundational biblical anthropology—*imago Dei* (see Comensoli, 2011). This body of scholarship and empirical research has evolved across all the major Christian denominations and is characteristically interdisciplinary, for example, drawing on theology, sociology, ethics, psychology, mainstream disability studies and history (Swinton, 2011).

Unfortunately, history has shown that the "...the naturalist affirmation conditional on a vision of human nature in the fullness of its health and strength" does not always "extend help to the irremediably broken, such as the mentally handicapped...but the careers of Mother Teresa or Jean Vanier [and Henri Nouwen] seem to point to a different pattern, emerging from Christian spirituality" (Taylor, 1989: 517). A pattern that is marked by humility, Godly strength in human weakness (2 Corinthians 12: 9-10), brokenness, vulnerability and sacrificial love, which as consultant sport psychiatrist, Beigel (2000: xvi) intimates, is an "anathema" to a modern athlete, who is more often than not bound to the win-at-all-costs mentality that characterizes the commercialised world of professional sport (Watson and White, 2007). This is something that is arguably a symptom of the modern proud, self-reliant consciousness, which Higgs and Braswell (2004: 372) suggest, "...is synonymous with virtue" in many of our cultural institutions, such as sport, media, religion and work. Regrettably, this is the meta-narrative of the west in which the sub-culture of sport has developed its selfist, materialistic and utilitarian values, which we argue are diametrically opposed to the gospel and often lead to idolatry and wide-spread ethical and moral dilemmas.

Despite the many potential positives of sport, the "victory-cult" that we contend dominates modern able-bodied and disabled (e.g., Gard and Fitzgerald, 2008) professional sport and which directly feeds into youth and children's sports (David, 2005), has led to a whole range of unhealthy practices and behaviour. These include, violence, trash talk, prideful self-glorification and promotion, drug taking, greed, financial irregularities, abuse of body, mind and others, eating disorders in certain sports, nationalism, alienation in personal, regional and national relationships and on the horizon genetic performance enhancement technologies (Trothen, 2011) that pose a "...potential threat to the London 2012 Olympics" (House of Commons, 2007: 40). This situation has led Watson (2012a,b) to suggest that athletes with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities—which includes the "movement" of the *Special Olympics*—are one prophetic sign, among others, to the modern sporting Babel and wider society.

The idea that those with intellectual disabilities have a prophetic message for the modern age has been championed by the founder of *L'Arche*, Jean Vanier, theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and Amos Yong and the controversial disability rights activist and lay theologian, Wolf Wolfensberger (Harshaw, 2010). In brief, it is proposed by these writers that the vulnerability, openness, transparency and humility often evidenced in persons with intellectual disabilities, acts as a foil, and intentional offence *from* God (1 Corinthians 1: 27-29)⁶, to an age in which self-promotion, utilitarianism, intellectualism, human ability and status, physical beauty and rationalism are the dominant ideologies and thus markers of success and self-worth (Hauerwas, 2004). In this regard, the growing academic literature on the "the modern-day celebrity" (e.g., Ward, 2011) includes analyses of A-list celebrities, such as sporting demi-gods David Beckham and Tiger Woods (until recently) and high-profile athletes with disabilities who have recently gained celebrity status, such as Dame Tanni-Grey Thompson, Mark Zupan from the docu-movie, *Murderball* (Gard and Fitzgerald, 2008) and Ade Adepitan MBE (all paralympians). While this is a positive cultural shift in terms of the way in which disability is viewed, the fact that all of these "celebrities" are

⁶Following Yong (2007), we in *no way* suggest that those with intellectual disabilities are foolish but that their lives interrogate and critique culturally-bound notions of "normality" and self-worth.

“physically disabled”, is worth noting. To our knowledge, there are, and never have been, any Special Olympians who have attained “celebrity status” within the orbits of western media, something which Watson (2012a,b) suggests reflects a series of deeply entrenched societal values and beliefs that marginalize and devalue those with intellectual disabilities.

Conversely, a “theology of vulnerability” and an ethos of “downward mobility” (Comensoli, 2011) is something that flows both from recent Christian writings on disability and from the findings of the present study. Perhaps one of the best examples of this “theology of vulnerability” and the importance of mutuality in relationship, is narrated in Henri Nouwen’s book, *Adam* (1997). Toward the end of his life the well-known theologian and spiritual writer, Nouwen, gave up the prestige of an academic career and became a pastor in the *L’Arche* Daybreak community, Canada. Through his daily relationship with one of the residents of the community, Adam, a severely physically and intellectually disabled man, he came to see Adam as his “...friend...teacher...spiritual director...counsellor” and “minister” (Nouwen, 1997: 53). Having been embroiled in the “culture of the strong” (consider the sports world), Nouwen came to the realisation that he resisted this “downward mobility” or “descending he ladder”, which is a central tenet of *L’Arche*:

“I found myself resisting “becoming like Adam”. I did not want to be dependent and weak. I did not want to be needy. Somewhere though I recognised that Adam’s way, the way of radical vulnerability, was also the way of Jesus”.

(Nouwen, 1997: 79)

In short, Adam’s “being” and “presence” prophetically spoke the mystery of Jesus into Nouwen’s heart and helped to dismantle the walls of defensiveness, fear of failure, unhealthy perfectionism and the need for control. Interestingly, many of these characteristics, and others, such as narcissism, pride and the neurotic need for adulation, match those identified in psychological and psychiatric research on the personality profiles of elite professional sport performers (Sager, Lavalley and Spray, 2009).⁷ Therefore, the relevance and prophetic potential of the type of “relational dynamic” shown in Nouwen’s story is clear in a sports world, a microcosm of wider culture that is often characterized by “ascending the ladder” and “upward mobility” in which the quest for success may lead to alienation in relationships at a personal and national level.

Clearly, “sports disability culture” may then have a prophetic edge in terms of conveying something of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In a non-religious examining the psycho-social journey of disablement of a rugby player who has suffered paralysis following a spinal-cord injury, Smith and Sparkes (2008: 232) suggest that such stories can act as powerful “counter-narratives” that challenge accepted cultural and institutional norms. This notion is not unlike the prophetic message that we contend is implicit in the present study, in that counter-narratives “...are tools designed to repair the damage inflicted on identities by abusive power systems” (Nelson, 2001: xiii). Smith and Sparkes propose that these powerful narratives offer “...revelatory, liberatory, therapeutic, and transformative possibilities for some individuals and communities by making and legitimising different ways of living as a disabled person” (233). Developing this theme theologically, we explore how the life-story of one father and son relationship might act as a “counter-narrative”, a prophetic “incarnational message”, or what practical theologian, Swinton (2011: 306), calls a revelation of love through “body proclamation” to the institution of big-business professional sport.

Context and Methods

⁷Of course, there are many elite sports performers whose personalities are not characterized by these potentially negative aspects.

The first author met the participants of the present study while undertaking observational fieldwork⁸ amidst a *L'Arche* community in the UK. *L'Arche* is a Catholic based international federation of 137 communities in 40 countries, where people with (core members) and without (assistants) disabilities live together in a spirit of friendship, mutuality and hospitality. During an informal interview, the director of the community disclosed the inspirational story of John (71 years) and Sylvia (67 years) Courtney and their fostered son, James Hughes (38 years); a story in which the sport of long-distance running had acted as a vehicle in the physical, emotional and spiritual development of James, who was born blind due to a congenital abnormality (i.e., born without eyes), had profound learning difficulties and was virtually non-verbal. With the community director's verbal consent, the first author arranged to meet and interview John, Sylvia and James to investigate further the role that sport played in this father-son relationship.

The research process that followed featured those methods of social enquiry common to qualitative research, i.e., participant observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis (Bryman, 2008). Primary data was collected via two 75minute semi-structured interviews which were carried out at the participants' home in 2010. Data was analysed in-line with Miles and Huberman (1994); that is, data reduction, data display and conclusion-drawing.⁹ From the data analysis three key themes emerged: (i) disability, familial relations and sport; (ii) poetry, prayers and running; and (iii) growth through adversity. We utilise these themes to demonstrate the original contribution of this study and specifically the value of disability sport and the extent to which it might carry a prophetic incarnational message. We begin with the first of our themes which also includes some brief context and background on the establishment on the initial relationship between the Courtney's and James.

Results and Discussion

Disability, Familial Relations and Sport

“When a story is told, if that storytelling is successful, it creates in the listener hope”.

(Mattingly, 1998: 93)

“Having a profound intellectual disability not different from being Albert Einstein when it comes to what it means to know God. It is all gift. Such forms of disability are but one instance of the overall condition of the human being”.

(Swinton, 2011: 301)

This is a story of a father and son who through long-distance running have inspired hope in their own lives and those of others. In 1987, John and Sylvia Courtney already parents of five of their own children, fostered James Hughes at the age of fourteen from a Barnardo's Children's home. Prior to this, James had been institutionalised in the state care system and had suffered varying degrees of neglect, rejection and isolation due to his profound disabilities. These include, congenital blindness (i.e., he was born without eyes), physical limitations (a stooped posture), profound learning difficulties and was almost entirely incapable of verbal communication. At the onset of the fostering relationship, James' associated behaviours included repetitive rocking, self-harm (e.g.,

⁸This three-day visit to *L'Arche* was the start point of a much wider research project on the theology of physical and intellectual disability (including illness) in sport and leisure. A special edition of the *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, is currently under construction.

⁹As a secondary data archive (a personal archive) of newspaper and magazine articles was also used and identified participants by name, and due to their own desire to ensure authenticity, participant names have not been anonymized in this study. Due to the potential consequences of disclosure of names in the public domain the researcher explained this to the participants.

biting himself), an enduring sense of fear of intimacy in relationships, violent outbursts and he could not walk more than a hundred yards in open spaces without screaming and defensively laying down in the foetal position. While James is technically John and Sylvia's "foster son", it is clear that after twenty-five years, in their hearts and minds, they consider James as one of their own. As Sylvia reflects, "while it is very hard work, he captured our hearts...he might not be biologically [our son] but he is family...because it's the only family he knows".

The circumstances surrounding James' time at the Barnardo's children's home and the beginning of the fostering relationship with John and Sylvia 1987, are in themselves, an important part of the story, in that John and Sylvia believe there was a degree of providence involved. A young Christian lady who knew James during his time at Barnardo's had earnestly prayed that he would be fostered by a Christian couple, as the time approached when he would be put in long-term residential care. Sylvia comments that "she [the woman concerned] prayed for a miracle and she thinks we're the miracle [laughter]". Of course, for many prospective foster couples, James' multiple disabilities would not have been an attractive proposition; too much to bear. It is, however, the most broken, marginalized and rejected that Jesus and those who follow Him are called to embrace. Indeed, this is the central ethos of *L'Arche* community that James attends, which John and Sylvia spoke very positively about.

In addition to long-distance running, James also plays the piano, participates in indoor wall-climbing under the supervision of his relief care-worker, swims with John at weekends and enjoys weaving workshops during his weekly visits to *L'Arche*. James also attends a local Catholic Church, accompanied by Sylvia, and is able to sing some hymns and say simple prayers in broken speech; his speech often accompanied by loud incoherent noises that are characteristic of those with intellectual difficulties. On one occasion, Sylvia began to walk him out of Church due to him "making too much noise". However, the Priest demonstrated a sensitivity and inclusivity not always practised across the world Church, stopping Sylvia and noting that "he's [James] in God's house, they're all welcome". This type of diverse and multi-dimensional lifestyle, initiated and supported by family, friends and professionals, is an ideal that Harris (2010) and Milian (2008) suggest, can only lead to a range of positive physical, social and spiritual outcomes, not least positive identity formation and feelings of mastery and self-worth for those with disabilities.

After two years of "training" (1987-1989), as John describes it (he is an ex-paratrooper), that was characterised by a slow patient process of building trust and sacrificially loving James, John and James entered their first running race (1989) of three miles, which was the beginning of an inspirational twenty-five year story. When they run together, James is not attached with a wrist-rope to John, as is the norm for severely visually-impaired runners, but runs just behind him on his right hand side, repetitively touching the back of his left hand on John's right upper arm, "trusting him" to lead. Since their first race in 1989 they have completed in 41 marathons (including 16 London marathons), 77 half-marathons and countless five and 10K races. In an average week, training for races, which is a vital part of James routine, comprises approximately 40 miles. Their remarkable sporting and related fund-raising achievements have resulted in honours and awards from the Liverpool Royal School for the Blind, a host of disability sport organizations and charities and in this process, meeting Queen Elizabeth II and the former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, amongst other dignitaries.

While our central focus here is the father-son relationship between John and James, it is important to recognise the role of Sylvia Courtney as integral to the facilitation of this relationship over time. Sylvia plays an irreplaceable role in the day-to-day care of James, offering prayer and practical support during running events for her husband and foster son, and she has completed four marathons with them, her first, the London marathon (2009) at the age of 65 years. On a number of occasions, John acknowledged the humble service of his wife when discussing his running with James: "...it's been a combination of many things like the wife, the food we had before the race, putting up with me and James going out [training]...family played a big part". As researchers have observed, the support of family is essential if the person with intellectual disabilities is to grow and

flourish, in particular in the first months and years of the fostering relationship that is often a very challenging time (e.g., Harris 2010).

Metaphorically speaking, the “relationship” which developed between John and James during those early days of fostering, reflects the infant footsteps of the Christian believer’s walk with God, that is, a slow process of developing trust and confidence and a broken, dependent son who accepts the grace, love and guidance of his father. Of course, this metaphor should not be overplayed, however, John’s description of the first two-and-a-half years of bonding with his son through the vehicle of sport, a well-recognised way for fathers to positively engage with their children (Kay, 2010; Warnke and Bender, 2008), is insightful:

“...when we first started, we were just walking but his confidence grew over the months...years. We tried to innovate and one of the innovations was to hold his two hands on a hill and pull him down. Then I started turning backwards and he had no concept, with being blind, of running. Like if a child goes to the baths he sees other children making breast strokes...But being blind he hadn't got that concept of the world...it's like if you get up in the night and there's no light on. Your steps are small...The inch becomes a cliff [laughter]. James's steps were small. So what I've done to make him make bigger strides. I used to grab hold of his trouser legs and lift his legs up and down to give him the movement...so it was those small things...

I was getting to know James and he was getting to know me and over a long period of time, my confidence in him and his confidence in himself and his ability were building up. We went from the foundations...and then I said we'll put shorts on and we'll go and try jogging and many a time he'd throw himself on the floor screaming...now after about a year our breakthrough came and he threw himself down on the floor and needless to say he'd get an audience straight away, looking at him screaming...and I said to him get up, get up for my sake and I knew I'd said the wrong bloody thing [Laughter]...holding him [James] and getting to his feet I said from this moment on you're going to do it on your own...He's screaming by the way all the time now and I'm holding him tight and we're standing nose to nose and I said 'from this moment on you're going to do it on your own and one thing, I'm never going to leave you.

He had the ability to do it and with those slow beginnings...from the initial 200 yards or so down the road, going across the road...we were running for an hour as a jog and his first race we went to was a Liverpool race and it was called 'Give a Child a Chance'. That was a three mile race...He did stop a bit in the three miles but when he finished he was smiling so I knew it was something”.

Through what can only be described as an “unorthodox” but effective training regime featuring patience, perseverance and what might be termed “tough love”, John spoke love into James’ “orphan heart” (John. 14: 18) that was scarred by wounds of rejection, abandonment and pain. This level of intentional commitment (*agape* love) to love another is of course Jesus’ promise to those who believe in Him, (Matthew. 28: 20) and is what Swinton, Mowat and Baines (2011: 15) describe as “...an embodied relational act that we receive from one another”. What is perhaps most demonstrative of the relational trust that James developed in John, is John’s description of the technique that they used to run together, which in many ways echoes the famous Christian poem, *Footprints in the Sand*:

“When I’m running I don’t see James, James is two paces behind me...
he touches my elbow...Yeah...our steps are in unison with each other
so really we’re running, it’s like an invisible man behind me...”.

To help navigate around corners, John sings the alphabet and James homes in on his voice. John has also taught James a number of simple songs, which they sing together when things get physically

and mentally tough towards the end of long races, which is similar to the psychological techniques that endurance athletes adopt. In this regard, it is widely acknowledged that those with visual impairment (and other forms of impairment) generally develop other faculties, in particular acutely sensitive hearing, and become “hyper-conscious of the body” (Hull, 2001: 123). This is something that this father-son team use to their advantage and which also perhaps has deeper spiritual meaning, as Demmons (2007) has argued.

Through synthesising Karl Barth’s concept of “co-humanity” and Michael Polanyi’s notion of “tacit knowledge”, Demmons (2007), in support of others (Creamer, 2009) has argued that persons with intellectual disabilities (and other) disabilities can experience God and others through “...epistemic modes of knowing”, for example, via “bodily knowledge...through the senses, emotion and relationship”. She goes on to suggest that music, art and dance may have a significant role to play in the spiritual enrichment of the lives of those with intellectual disabilities, as recognised and practised in *L’Arche* creative workshops around the world. We contend that the trust, intimacy and love that surrounds James and John’s relationship through the vehicle of long-distance running, characterized by their “tacit knowing” demonstrates that it may be possible to apply Demmon’s (2007) work to an analysis of sporting locales. Creativity, intrinsic enjoyment and playfulness in dance and sport (and human play) have all been identified by theologians as potential vehicles for connection to God and others (e.g., Savage, 2000; Moltmann, 1972). In support of Swinton (2004) who has argued for the inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities in the sacraments and orders of the church and the idea that lack of cognitive ability does not disqualify a person from a meaningful spiritual life, this goes beyond an enlightenment epistemology that solely relies on cognitive reflection and rationalization for spiritual knowledge and revelation, as does the use of poetry and prayer.

Poetry, Prayers and Running

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect
in weakness”.

(2 Corinthians 12:9)

St. Paul’s acknowledgement of his human weakness and dependence on God is Joni Erickson Tada’s favourite bible verse and is the foundational concept of the worldwide disability ministry of *Joni and Friends* (Markham, 2006). Prior to her diving accident and subsequent physical paralysis, Joni was an athletic young woman who deeply loved God and yet it was not until her disablement that her “radical dependence” on Him led to a deeper intimacy and fruitfulness. Likewise, we see within the context of the present study the theme of dependence on God, vulnerability and a gaining of revelation and insight into God’s love and character.

Following over three years of training and preparation, in 1990, John and James entered their first long-distance race (26.2 miles), the Humber Bridge Marathon (Hull, U.K). In line with past studies which have shown that “...parents and teachers are often quick to remind a boy who is blind or visually impaired of his limitations” (Warnke and Bender, 2008: 295), John was bombarded with the doubts and scepticism from others (i.e., teachers and other parents), with regard to James’ ability to complete the marathon and the wisdom of him participating in it at all. Despite this, John persevered and at the start of the race, from a place of vulnerability, took James aside from the crowd of runners (amidst which he was becoming anxious)¹⁰, and prayed:

“Lord, James and I stand here today with all our training behind us and the trial of the
marathon ahead of us.

James had never had a conversation with anybody in his life,

¹⁰While empirical research (Mastro and French, 1986) has suggested that congenitally and adventitious runners do not experience higher trait and state levels of anxiety before and during competition, the participants of Mastro and French’s study did not have intellectual disabilities, so would be more likely to be able to rationalize the context and situation, keeping anxiety levels down.

James has never harmed anybody in his life,
James has never seen anybody in his life,
James carries the burden that he'll carry all his days,
Lord look down and bless all the children that are born with a disability for they are born
angels and stay angels all their lives, for now I know my purse is always full, one is never
poor when has oneself to give”.

Of course, John does not mean literally that James is an angel but perhaps this metaphor has some spiritual currency. Reinders (2008: 225), argues that while we are all equal before God (*imago Dei*) in regard to our status and worth regardless of our differences (disabled or non-disabled), for those with intellectual disabilities He “...cannot help but favour them as his “little ones” whose guardian angels secure his attention (Matthew 18: 10-11)”. These “angels” or as we argue in the context of sport, “prophets” (1 Corinthians 1: 27-29), perhaps, should also secure the attention of the modern commercialized sports institution.

Indeed, we argue that the words of John’s poem have a prophetic edge and a depth of revelatory meaning *for* James and John and their family. When John was asked about the source of these words he light-heartedly responded, “I’m not a poem writer or a prayer writer but that came to me then...it was inspired yeah. It must have been somebody putting the words into my mouth [laughter]”. This poem has now become something of a personal *raison d’être* (for John, Sylvia and James) and at the start of each marathon the family recite the prayer while holding hands in a circle, as an inward and outward sign of dependence on God.

In support of past work (Reinders, 2008), both John and Sylvia describe how this dependence on God and their relationship with James over the years, especially through running, had positively developed their individual characters in terms of levels of patience, understanding of humility, sacrificial love and the heart of Jesus for the broken of this world. What was particularly evident was the lack of self-pity or negativity that came through their stories, not least, we believe, due to the positive role that sport had played in their lives, especially during times of adversity and difficulty.

Hurdles Along the Way: Growth through Adversity

Perhaps the best illustrative example of how long-distance running contributed to the physical, emotional and spiritual development of James and his relationship with his foster father, is through their successful completion (10 times!) of the challenging Rhayader 20 mile race in the mountains of Wales. Here runners navigate over notoriously tough terrain, up and down hills and around lakes. Reflecting on their experiences and performances in this race, John comments:

“Well, being bent over, a stubby little lad [James] physically...I’m always proud to have given James muscle and I’ve understood the ability was always there and nobody’s seen it but I’ve given [him] stamina to run a race in nearly a hurricane, we’ve been up in the mountains in Wales where runners have been running down, stopped at five miles and James and I have been like [laughter] we’ve been completely red like a fish that’s been boiled and with the wind of and the hailstones battering our heads and that he’s carried on and we went up like 1600 feet...and I looked around and his head was up straight. I said, ‘well if his head’s up straight boy we’re going on’ [laughter] and other runners are saying, ‘we’re going back down’ like and they packed in but James kept going and we finished it. That was the Rhayader 20 miles. It’s tougher than a marathon...because of the terrain.”

The depth of trust that James has in his father is clearly illustrated here. As Hull (1990: 77) observes from his own experience of visual-impairment, “blindness creates a strange variation upon familiar human patters of dependence and interdependence” in which the person with the disabilities must deeply trust others for guidance in all areas of life, including mountain running in this case.

Again, there is a clear spiritual message in their sporting accomplishments, a message of overcoming, of hope and joy amidst adversity and physical and intellectual limitations. Derek Marks, the Headmaster of the Liverpool Royal School for the Blind (RSB), the school that James attended for a number of years after being fostered, resonates this notion, when talking of the family's accomplishments prior to a school visit from the Queen, a patron of the RSB:

“What John and Sylvia have achieved is magnificent. They have put into practice what a previous Headmaster told me – there is always something to praise a child in. James is the most beautiful blot on my landscape...I'll tell the Queen”.¹¹

Jon and James' story is a powerful “counter narrative” that challenges the often unhealthy message of “winning-at-all-costs” in professional sport, in which failure to win, to “self-actualize” and gain external rewards, often leads to immoral behaviours and low self-concept and feelings of unworthiness. Indeed, when reflecting on those people who had questioned his motives, wisdom and their joint accomplishments, John states that:

“...none of them wanted to be associated with failure but ...there's no such thing as failure because that's a lesson...you're learning all the time...Yeah, humility...I talk about James' muscle and things like that but really it just comes from your soul...We were last in all the races...and I think a lot of people can learn from it”.

This said, we, as authors, do not in any form denigrate the essential value of human beings “striving for excellence” in sport and all other human endeavours, as reflected in the guiding principle of the Paralympics for the last two decades, that is, “building on and celebrating ability” (Howe, 2008: i). Hull (2003a), in describing the educational potential for others entering the “disability world”, adds another angle to this argument:

“One might learn to see the way the other worlds look from within the world which one has entered. This might be done through studying the poetry written by quadriplegics, attending the Para-Olympics, reading the literature of pathography”.

On this note, it is crucial to understand that John and James also seek excellence and success in what they do but in a markedly different way to many modern sportspersons, as do other father-son disability sport teams, such as *Team Hoyt* (see Hoyt and Yaeger, 2010). And it is our contention that because of this, their story offers a “prophetic message”, not unlike the movement of *L'Arche* and the message that Adam (1999) was to Henri Nouwen in his later life. So, perhaps through adopting a relational understanding of spirituality and faith for those with intellectual disabilities in sport and other walks of life (including the church), would allow us to “...begin to find new ways of preaching the Word to those who have no words” (Swinton, 2004: 21). In light of the lack of theological reflection on disability sport and initiatives that address the spiritual aspects of embodied sporting activities *per se*, with the exceptions such as *L'Arche* and the *Special Olympics*, which the Executive Director, Timothy Shriver (2010: 2), describes as a “...civil rights movement of the heart—powered by sport”, we argue that sports properly understood and played can (and should) act as a vehicle for the holistic care, growth, development and enrichment of the lives of those with disabilities.

Methodologically and conceptually, this study is a clear example of practical theology, an approach that is distinctive from mainstream theological disciplines, as its start point is with human experience (Swinton and Mowat, 2006). Importantly, though, Swinton and Mowat (2006) emphasize that human experience and reason is not a “source of revelation” and is therefore inadequate to understand the mystery of the gospel, that is, the incarnation, cross and resurrection. Following this, the experience of disability, sport (i.e., long-distance running) and the relationship between this study's participants, is a “place” where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted

¹¹Retrieved from secondary data set, newspaper archive: cited in the *Liverpool Star*, April 25, 1991.

and lived out. This “place” and the narrative that evolves from it must, however, undergo critical theological reflection in order to remain true to biblical revelation.

On this note, further research is needed in this area, and as Milian (2008) and Harris (2010) advocate, individuals and programme designers need to be aware of the educational, rehabilitative and recreational dimensions of care for those with visual impairment and intellectual disabilities. Swinton (2011) recently identified that theological reflection on disability includes contributions from many fields of study. We argue that sports disability scholars need to come to the table and theologians need to start taking sport and disability sport more seriously, as literature to-date is sparse. An important caveat in this endeavour will be to ensure that the research that begins to evolve is *both* liberating in regard to change in political and institutional legislation and people’s hearts (i.e., ‘hearing and seeing’ the prophetic in sport disability narratives). As Swinton goes on to suggest, “... disability rights are important” in so far “as they relate to the coming of the kingdom...rights without love won’t work” (315), in any institution, including sport.

Conclusive Remarks

John described the transformation in James’ life through the sport of long-distance running as nothing short of a divine “miracle”. When surveying the whole story that spans twenty-five years, it is indeed remarkable that a fourteen-year old boy who fearfully curled up in the foetal position screaming if he was made to walk further than one hundred yards, has now run over 40 marathons. Undoubtedly, this is a testimony of the sacrificial love and care of John and Sylvia, who took seriously the pervasive biblical mandate to shelter, care and nurture orphans. In so doing, we suggest that along with James, their *lives* carry an “incarnational prophetic message” that is needed in an era when self-glorification, pride and celebrity status hold sway in our culture. This study has shown the numerous benefits that sport may have for those with visual impairments and intellectual disabilities. These include:

- Enhanced physical health, in James’ case, especially posture and cardiovascular status.
- An increased sense of self-worth and confidence and purpose in life, that is, running has afforded James the opportunity for success.
- A deepening bond and relationship between James and his parents, especially with his father John.
- Increased social interaction and friendships with other runners in training and race situations.
- Through the “bodily” engagement in sport (and leisure activities and Church attendance), and the concomitant human-relations, emotions and senses, running has offered James a spiritual meaning of connectivity with God and others.

In conclusion, a nineteenth century hymn based on a verse from John’s gospel, “without Me ye can do nothing”, is perhaps a fitting way to end this study, in that it expresses the source of John, Sylvia and James strength and determination and their dependence on Him in their weakness that helps them to “...run straight towards the goal in order to win the prize, which is God’s call through Christ Jesus to the life above”.¹²

“I COULD not do without Thee,
O Saviour of the lost,
Whose precious Blood redeem’d me
At such tremendous cost;
Thy righteousness, Thy pardon,
Thy precious Blood must be
My only hope and comfort,
My glory and my plea.

¹²Phil. 3: 14, Good News Bible.

I could not do without Thee,
I cannot stand alone,
I have no strength or goodness,
No wisdom of my own;
But Thou, beloved Saviour,
Art all in all to me,
And weakness will be power
If leaning hard on Thee.”

Frances R. Havergal (1836-1879)¹³

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¹³Havergal, F.R. (1873) *I Could not do Without Thee*, Available online: <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/i/c/icouldnt.htm> (Accessed 11 August 2010).

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