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Disability as Spiritual Enlightenment: An ethnographic account of the significance of religion in Paralympic sport

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of spirituality in the lives of high performance athletes who have acquired impairments. In so doing, it highlights the importance of spirituality and/or religion as a vehicle for dealing with issues of re-embodiment and how this may impact upon long-term athlete wellbeing. Featuring ethnographic data collected over the course of a number of Paralympic Games, the paper explores the act of re-embodiment and how being ‘re-born’ in line with various religious frameworks is something to which elite athletes with a disability may turn in order to make sense of their place in the world. Drawing upon literature from the field of religious studies as well as a critical theorization of disability, the paper illuminates the relationship between sport and religion using the ‘imperfect’ bodies of Paralympians as a catalyst to explore the importance and meaning of spirituality in the everyday existence of sportspeople with disabilities.

KEYWORDS: Sport, disability, religion, spirituality, ethnography, Paralympians

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we explore the importance of spirituality in the cultural environment surrounding Paralympic sport. As individuals we would approach this from different perspectives. The first author has conducted ethnographic fieldwork within the Paralympic movement for 25 years, while the second author is one of the leading protagonists within the field of sport, spirituality and religion. It is hoped that by combining our expertise the paper will address the research lacunae that appears to exist within the literature surrounding disability sport and religion. The paper begins with an ethnographic vignette that was captured over 25 years ago and that we believe is useful in setting the scene for the discussion which follows. We then take a brief foray into the field of religion and sport before embarking on a discussion of re-embodiment. After exploring potential links between re-embodiment and notions of religious pilgrimage, we move into the final section of the paper which considers the relationship between the Paralympic Games and muscular Christianity. In conclusion we draw together the key themes of our discussion whilst at the same time assessing the extent to which ethnographic research might aid our understanding of the intersectionality between disability, sport and religion.

SPORT, SPIRITUALITY AND DISABILITY

My god it's early! 5:30 in the morning and I'm up and about all because I was told last night by my roommate the events this morning would save my soul. As I sit and wake in the early dawn I am in Seoul, South Korea for the 1988 Paralympic Games. My roommate is a cyclist Dermot Doherty and he, like me, is a Class VII athlete with cerebral palsy (CP). Dermot acquired his CP from road traffic accident in which he suffered a brain trauma. I

had been familiar with Dermot at other major disability sports events and had heard that he was a committed Christian but that really hadn't registered on me because of my "lack of faith". Being billeted [roomed] with Dermot before the two and a half weeks in Seoul meant that I was confronted with the zeal and exuberance that that seem to be part and parcel of his particular flavour of Christianity. He was insistent last evening as we unpacked our luggage that I would join him this morning in prayer with other Christians in the Paralympic Village. Initially I was hesitant and expressed an interest in spirituality but no faith in Christianity. He was insistent, in part because I told him that I had been raised as a member of the United Church of Canada and that I had moved away "from the flock" when I had found anthropology at University.

With my anthropological hat on I decided I to go along to the prayer meeting this morning. Dermot was convinced that he could realign my thinking and draw me back "to the flock" and that we would become fast friends in the process. What did transpire was for the first time I was openly confronted by the embodiment of issues surrounding disability and religion. Having been raised as a member of a Protestant sect of the Christian church I was somewhat familiar with various teachings in the Bible, and the manner in which the Bible portrays disability, invalidity, and otherness more generally and it was unclear to me how people that were disabled [by society] could actually buy into the Christian doctrine. All too often stories in the Bible appear to focus on inner goodness sometimes without consideration of the social value of normality. While these parables may be useful in the environment of the Christian church the budding anthropologist in me became increasingly cautious of whether inner qualities were actually paramount in the society around me.

At school I had been bullied in large part because of my physical difference. This is not to say that I would not have been bullied if I had been "normal" because when we explore friends and families life experiences we have all been picked on for one reason or another...

Attending this early morning Christian prayer meeting opened my eyes to how impaired individuals might use religion as a vehicle for making sense of one of the big questions that surround the lives of individuals with acquired impairment - "Why me?".

"Why me?" is a question that I asked myself from an early age. As a youngster I was obsessed with television show 'Fantasy Island' where characters went to live out their dreams of a better alternative life yet in the end the 'improved life' was never any better. My feeling was that if 'Fantasy Island' had been real it would have been wonderful to have gone on the show and asked to have my body made normal, to simply walk free from the burden of CP. One of my quests is to understand how different life would be if I were considered to be normal. My parents were vehemently opposed to this kind of thinking and often stated that if I had not been born with CP my character would not have developed in the same way. This was my interpretation of the world before I went to university and nowhere in Seoul am I confronted with another way of trying to make sense of the "Why me?" question. Maybe the answer is religion! In going along to the prayer meeting today I was struck by the enthusiasm and positive energy in the room. My experience with biblical readings and various rituals meant that, in spite of my lack of belief, I felt at home in this environment. These athletes, with varying degrees of impairment, all appeared to share a common bond – there was a sense that biblical teachings facilitated a better understanding of the "Why me?" question that has often seemed so difficult for me to answer in isolation. The further question for me as a budding anthropologist was "To what extent is involvement in this network of Christianity simply a placebo designed to eliminate the hardship of disability that surrounds impaired bodies?". Spirituality and religion are standard constructs within all cultural environments and I guess what I hoped to achieve by being at this early morning meeting is a sense of how important it is to Paralympic sporting culture.

I was struck when I returned to my room at shortly after seven o'clock how Dermot was as inquisitive about why I was not Christian as I had been about the experience of being at the meeting. We talked at length about how being impaired had "saved him" from the reckless life that he had led while able-bodied.

This vignette highlights many of the issues that are at the heart of the debate surrounding disability and religion. One important distinction to make here is that we perceive disability to be, in a manner of speaking, a medical construction (Oliver, 1990) and as such it is, in reality, a social problem that we are addressing. Of course, it is understandable that, for some, the impact of impairment on embodiment relates to broader understandings of spirituality and religion. Such impacts become somewhat more acute when placed within the context of elite sport simply because embodiment is so central to sporting scenarios and experiences. Likewise, physical embodiment has long since featured as a central tenet of the sport-religion relationship. It is for this reason we begin our discussion with a brief resume of this field.

SPORT AND RELIGION

Over the past 30-40 years there has been a steady growth in the academic literature concerning sport and religion, (Watson & Parker, 2012a). Within this literature authors have explored a wide-variety of topics including: prayer and ritual, identity, pride and humility, disability, ethics and morality. A key historical theme has been that of muscular Christianity, a narrative that locates the development of modern-day sport in mid-19th century Britain amidst the alleged transformation of unruly pastimes into a series of structured and codified

games, primarily via the English public schools (Watson, Weir & Friend, 2005; Parker and Weir, 2012).

A key player in this transformational process was Thomas Arnold, Head teacher at Rugby school between 1828-1841, whose desire it was to mould his (male) students into 'good Christian gentlemen' by way of competitive games, an education in the classics, and generous helpings of discipline, respect and morality (Mangan, 1981). Most notable amongst documentary representations of Arnold's legacy is Thomas Hughes's fictional account *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857/1995), the story of a boy (Tom Brown) whose character is shaped during his days at Rugby around what came to be known as 'muscular Christianity'; a term encapsulating spiritual, moral and physical purity alongside notions of Christian manliness (Simon & Bradley, 1975). Of course, in reality muscular Christianity had at its roots in a whole range of ethical and moral concerns which were prevalent in Britain during the mid-1880s: the protection of the weak, the plight of the poor, and the promotion of moral virtue. The incorporation of these (and other) concerns into a framework of physical and spiritual 'cleanliness' resulted in the establishment of a series of core values which, in time, came to underpin the relationship between sport and religion: fair play, respect, strength (physical and emotional), perseverance, subordination, obedience, discipline, loyalty, co-operation, self-control, self-sacrifice, endurance. Especially significant here was a fervent Christian faith and stoic masculinity which collectively engendered the formation of personal character and a respect for the physical body. Revered too were virtues such as courage, temperance and *esprit de corps*; the 'holy trinity' of moral stature, subsequently expressed by the sporting ventures of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the modern Olympic Games.

Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, such underpinning values persist in modern-day commercialised sport where physical/bodily ‘perfection’ is often celebrated, glorified and revered (see Howe & Parker, 2012). These values sit in stark contrast to the realities of life for elite athletes with disabilities whose experiences of embodiment in relation to sporting performance are less straightforward (Watson & Parker, 2012b). So, how, we might ask, is embodiment negotiated and reconciled within this context and to what extent do notions of spirituality and religion feature as a part of this overall picture. In order to explore these issues in more detail it is to an analysis of the potential connections between re-embodiment and religion that we now turn.

RE-EMBODIMENT AND RELIGION

The concept of re-embodiment comes to our attention from the work of Seymour (1998) and specifically the importance of thinking of the body as a vehicle for understanding our relationship with the social world. For the able and disabled alike, we spend our lives engaged in embodiment: “Embodiment is our life-long obsession. Eating, sleeping, washing, grooming, stimulating and entertaining our bodies dominate our lives.” (Seymour, 1998: 4). While for the majority, this list of daily tasks would seem relatively unproblematic, for those experiencing a change in circumstances in relation to their body (as a result of a traumatic accident or as a by-product of aging) they can require considerable effort. What is clear is that the act of re-embodiment demands a new understanding of what we can and cannot do. Coming to terms with the frailty of the body is never an easy task. For the person who loses the ability to walk as a result of a car accident, for example, the physical trauma may heal long before the individual comes to terms with their new embodied self.

Rehabilitation of the body after an accident has created a disability industry around imperfect bodies (Albrecht, 1992) that, at times, prioritizes the need for a *normal* body over

functionality which enhances quality of life. The concept of rehabilitation is not simply a product of medical environments such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy clinics but goes beyond this and explores the need for the body in the everyday world. This is because “[R]e-embodiment takes place in a context of crisis, danger, fear uncertainty and risk. Although damaged bodies represent these characteristics in vivid form, they merely highlight the features that constitute the context of ‘high modernity’” (Seymour, 1998: xv). We are all vulnerable to changes in life circumstances and the process of re-embodiment is one way that the frailty of the human condition may be brought to our attention. Likewise, the process of aging means that we are all only temporarily able-bodied.

The integration of the body and mind is the starting point for a robust theory of embodiment (Csordas, 1990). Re-embodiment is similar, the only difference being that one understanding of embodiment is being replaced by another. When a tragic accident happens and an individual is left to pick up the pieces of their life, simply understanding the nature of what the body can and cannot do is not as easy as one might think. Shilling (1993: 100) has suggested that: “[T]he body is a corporeal phenomenon which not only is affected by the social system but also forms a basis for and shapes social relations”. In other words our experiences of our bodies can be shaped, at least in part, by the reactions that others have to them and, in the case of people with physical impairments, this reaction is more often than not less than positive, particularly in the world outside conventional rehabilitation services.

Reactions to the pain involved in dealing with the acute aspects of traumatic injury can have long-lasting consequences. As Seymour (1998: 10) has argued: “[I]t is undeniable that the experience of pain and a person’s reactions to it are to a large extent socially mediated, but pain is also experienced as an attack on the phenomenological and embodied self.” The physicality of dealing with the onset of trauma and how we come to terms with what the body can and cannot do is an important issue. In many respects there is a lingering

feeling that the re-embodiment that individuals with impairments go through following a traumatic accident is reminiscent of Giddens' (1991) conceptualization of 'second chance'. One of the ways in which this second chance is articulated for such individuals is through the use of religion and (for Christians at least) the symbolism associated with the resurrection of Christ that comes to the fore when discussions around a better world and how sport, through the vehicle of impairment, has saved them.

Much in the same way that Seymour (1998: 20) explores how disability may give people "... a chance to rethink their bodies", the observations and discussions with respondents featured in this research draw similar comparisons by using religion as the catalyst for such exploration. As Seymour (1998: 20) continues: "[D]isability thus not only provokes reflection on the body", but might also present such individuals "... with the opportunity to remake their bodies in different, and maybe less restrictive ways". In practical terms the fact that someone who suffers an injury that causes paralysis has to lift their body around with their arms facilitates the acceleration of the re-embodiment process. If we lose the use of our bodies slowly through the aging process re-embodiment never actually takes place because we are changing incrementally day-by-day. Patients who undergo rehabilitation and subsequently have to use their bodies in a different way go through re-embodiment and, if they had a love for sport prior to their life-changing experience, this may enhance the translation from their old body to their new one (Seymour, 1998).

In the field of adapted physical activity (APA), rehabilitation, alongside sport and education, are seen as the primary environments in which people with impairments re-enter the real world. Within APA, these three fields can be seen as key environments in which re-embodiment is facilitated. As Seymour (1998: 119) notes, in this sense, we can appreciate how:

A winning wheelchair athlete is seen as the epitome of rehabilitative success. The vision of the strong male bodies competing for honours on the sports field is an image that has currency in the able-bodied world. Bravery in overcoming the catastrophe of a damaged body is a quality everyone can admire.

What this does not tell us is how these individuals come to terms with their new bodies. Unlike the work of Seymour (1998) where rehabilitation narratives are the central focus, in the present paper we are concerned with individuals who are high performance athletes and therefore we are more interested in the narratives that may have first been generated while re-embodiment (as part of the rehabilitation process) was on going. Hence, our specific interest is the extent to which the narratives of athletes are layered with religious symbolism and iconography and how the ‘spiritual’ journey (or, rather, pilgrimage) that these athletes take gives meaning to their lives above and beyond the sporting context.

CONTEXT AND METHOD

Over the last two decades there has been an increase of the use of participant observation as a primary ethnographic tool for detailing sporting communities. Important ethnographic studies have been produced by anthropologists such as Armstrong (1998) on football hooligans, Foley (1990) on American football, Klein (1991, 1993) on baseball and bodybuilding. Sociologists and those working in the broader field of cultural studies have effectively adopted this methodology which has enabled those interested in the social investigation of sport to gain insight into sporting subcultures (Atkinson and Young, 2008). Recently the ethnographic lens has also been turned upon the Paralympic Games (see Howe, 2008) to good effect.

Systematic use of research methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups can all add to a better understanding of the social world. Such techniques provide a distinctive snap-shot of life and culture as specific groups perceive it. What is distinctive about participant observation is the manner in which personal relationships become the vehicle for the collection of data. This research data featured here is a product of 25 years of being a product as well as a participant and observer of the Paralympic Movement (see Howe, 2008). By its very nature this paper is reflection of how, over time, one might begin to see oneself as part of one's research outputs. As a Paralympic athlete one of us shared many cultural insights with the informants who are at the heart of this research. For the other, Christian enlightenment is a central life aim. What follows is our interpretation of ethnographic research data gleaned from Paralympic athletes concerning the interconnections between sport, spirituality and disability and, in particular, around the two main themes already raised: (i) the concept of re-embodiment as a pilgrimage and (ii) the Paralympics as a product of muscular Christianity.

RE-EMBODIMENT AS PILGRIMAGE

A pilgrimage is generally understood as a journey or search of moral or spiritual significance. It is a journey that often takes one from a liminal state, either physically or spiritually, to one of centrality (Turner, 1973). As such the pilgrimage has long been the focus of anthropological study (Bardone, 2004; Coleman and Eade, 2004; Frey 1998, 2004). For the respondents featured here, the transition from life as an able-bodied individual to one with impairment can be seen, we argue, as a pilgrimage in light of the fact that many of our informants found spiritual significance in the changes that occurred to their bodies, and to their position within wider society. The comments of Karl, a quadriplegic wheelchair racer, are a case in point:

Coming to terms with my disability, with my shattered body, with my reduced status in society has made me reflect, in a religious sense, on my greater purpose in this world. It was really hard to come to terms with the fact that I would never walk again. Along this journey I was confronted by the depths of despair and alcoholism. An old friend rescued me by encouraging me to go along to a fundamentalist Christian church and people in the congregation who I now consider my family literally saved me from myself. Once my head was clear and my heart and soul were in tune, I was able to focus upon what I would do for the rest of my life. God spared me so that I might teach others that life is a struggle and we have to work on a daily basis to overcome the obstacles that are put in our way, that blind us from enlightenment. Sport, in particular wheelchair racing, is the vehicle that I use to send this message.

We can see from these comments that Karl is thankful for the guidance he received from the church he attended when life was full of despair. The need to make sense of the world is one of the reasons why Christians traditionally undertook pilgrimage (Coleman and Eade, 2004). For Victor and Edith Turner (1978) a pilgrimage is a time for reflection; a kinetic ritualistic journey both in the physical and spiritual sense. Turner and Turner (1978) see the journey related to pilgrimage as one which has the potential to create social and/or psychological transformation, if only temporary. They make a connection with van Gennep's (1909/ 2004) understanding of life as a series of transitions. It was van Gennep (1909/2004) who first articulated the concept of *rite of passage* and through the long-term ethnographic study that provided data for the present paper, it became clear that this is a process which athletes with impairments readily recognize, as Tom notes:

I was a real bastard as a kid, misbehaving and constantly in trouble with my family and often with the law. It is clear to me now that I was on a very destructive path. When I was in the [car] accident I was initially concerned with getting back to the life that I had but what I didn't realize was I was starting a journey; an important journey, one of self-reflection where Christ would be my guide. We often talk of rites of passage in terms of changing from a boy to a man, yet for me it was simply about turning a wayward youth into an honest person full of faith. Now for me the Paralympics is one of the vehicles that I can use to share this with the world.

Whilst for Tom a sense of personal and spiritual transition was central to his coming to terms with impairment, others were more explicit about the importance of gaining an understanding and appreciation of the body that was helped by biblical teaching, as outlined by Mark:

When I found God I began to undertake readings from the Bible. There are many examples where individuals who are inflicted with ailments such as leprosy or loss of sight who have other characteristics that make them good people worth saving in the eyes of the Lord. The fact that I have lost the ability to see drew me to these stories. Here were people with similar impairments to me who were virtuous and that needed to be understood as positive members of society. Through my sporting achievements and the motivational speaking I do to pay the bills I hope to get this message across.

Addressing the emphasis on physical (rather than spiritual) improvement during such processes, Seymour (1998: 120) reminds us that journeys of re-embodiment are not without their pitfalls. She emphasizes the problem of highlighting physical prowess as a marker of successful rehabilitation:

The preferencing of physicality in spinal injuries rehabilitation may disenfranchise the very people who most need its services. The creation of sporting heroes as rehabilitative triumphs obliterates from view the many severely damaged people for whom such activities will always be an impossibility.

Rehabilitation is often the start of pilgrimage. The respondents featured here all had to come to terms with the rebirth of their bodies. Within disability advocacy circles and the academic field of disability studies the body has become of central importance (Charleton, 1998; Murphy, 1987; Shakespeare, 2006). Yet there has been very little attention paid to sport as a catalyst of a 'better life', this despite the fact that central to this overall narrative is the notion that sport can be framed a tool for empowerment (Howe and Jones, 2006; Howe, 2011; Purdue and Howe, 2012) particularly in relation to the marketing vision of the international Paralympic committee (Howe, 2008; Jones and Howe, 2005). Much of the literature surrounding the Paralympics fails to critically evaluate the role of sport in the lives of people with impairments. For many in the field of disability studies, the ideology of sport is problematic (Campbell and Oliver, 1996). Early disability studies work that focused on the establishment of disability as a social construct (Oliver, 1990) was dismissive of the importance of the body in part, we believe, because it was this vessel that instigated much of the marginalization that people with impairment endured:

It is undeniable that sport and physical activities provide a context for enjoyment, self-identity and competence, but unless the conditions and ideology of sport are challenged, women, and indeed many men, will continue to operate in a context that compounds their disadvantage

(Seymour 1998:126).

Of course, early ideological foundations for the justification of sport can be seen, in part, as a manifestation of muscular Christianity and it is to this theme that we now turn.

PARALYMPIANISM AS MUSCULAR CHRISTIANITY

As we have seen, the early foundations of modern-day sport are believed to be located in what historians have referred to as muscular Christianity; an ideology surrounding the benefits of a healthy body and healthy mind (*mens sana in corpore sano*) and parallel arguments concerning the moral and ethical connections between physical activity, embodiment and the Christian faith.

In the case of the high performance athletes who attend the Paralympic Games many appear to have experienced a sense of vulnerability post-accident and, as a result, need to find a way of making sense of the 'new world' around them. The act of rehabilitation, re-embodiment and the process of answering the elusive question "Why me?" had drawn our respondents towards specific aspects of faith. The sporting pursuits that they engaged in while coming to terms with their new bodies can be seen to have the underlying hallmarks of the 'healthy body/healthy mind' ethos. How then, we might ask, did these athletes come to make specific lifestyle and sporting choices based on their experiences of rehabilitation? Sally explained how her spiritual journey had been one which encapsulated a sense of future purpose:

Through the process of rehabilitation I got to know some people that were further along in their understandings of their bodies since impairment and a number of these individuals attended a social group in my hometown. I went along to this. It turned out to be a church group, something in my previous life I would not be at ease with. I stayed - I got to understand the importance of seeing the link between my new physical self and the future direction my life would take. Sport became very important but it in a sense was only half the message. We all have capacity to positively contribute to society and teachings in the Bible are fantastic roadmap to understanding ourselves and how we can make a positive contribution to the world around us.

One of the ways that we might make sense of the conversion to a spiritual existence is to think of religion as a tool for healing. Csordas (2002:27) articulates three important steps in ritual healing: (i) predisposition – within the context of the primary community of reference, the supplicant must be persuaded that healing is possible, that the group's claims in this respect are coherent and legitimate; (ii) empowerment – the supplicant must be persuaded that the therapy is efficacious – that s/he is experiencing the healing effect of spiritual power; (iii) transformation – the supplicant must be persuaded to change, that is, s/he must accept the cognitive/affective, behavioural transformation that constitutes healing within the religious system.

It may well be that many of the athletes that participate in the Paralympic Games, who have become impaired through a traumatic accident, go through the three steps highlighted above as part of their rite of passage to re-embodiment. The first stage of *predisposition* requires that the individual believes that a level of rehabilitation is possible. Many, of course, adopt a false sense of hope that somehow they will overcome their impairment and be

‘normal’ again. Eventually, however, most individuals (and certainly all of those featured here) begin to gain an understanding of the long and arduous process of acceptance and adjustment.

The second stage of *empowerment* is where the individual begins to realize that the healing of the body and the mind are linked by what can be best described as a spiritual power. This, we believe, is where athletes begin to articulate a faith that is beyond the realities of the social world in which they live. It is this understanding of the world and their position in it that makes close attention to religious doctrine seem appropriate. The use of parables from the Bible to make sense of their re-embodiment and of the use of the vehicle of sport is paramount to their conversion and often their feelings of redemption and enlightenment. Of course, the cultural backgrounds from which these individuals come may be littered with understandings of religion and spirituality or they may be entirely devoid of this. It is clear that the athletes who profess a religious affiliation and embody a sense of spirituality have been transformed in some way.

Taking this analogy one step further, *transformation* from able-bodied non-believer to impaired believer follows, it seems, a process of resurrection. Within this final stage there has to be an acceptance of ‘ones lot’ in life and one’s behaviours must be transformed accordingly. Many of our respondents articulated similar feelings to those expressed by Jack:

When I went into rehab’ I was a completely different person than I am today.

I was only focused on myself, my family and friends were of little importance to me even members of my [motorcycle] gang were of little significance. My concerns were ultra-egocentric. The process and transformation I went through in rehab’ and the people I met in context of my first disability sport club saved me – and produced a new me where I see each day afresh and I

want to contribute to the greater good of this world. The good book tells us how to lead our lives and while sometimes the messages are slightly obscured in old fashioned language going along to Bible study groups would make it accessible to anyone. I would encourage anyone to become well read in the stories of the Bible but I am not arrogant enough to assume it is for everyone. What I do now in terms of my sporting success and my job as a role model is telling a tale of what can be achieved in spite of disability. I believe that God chose this path for me and I need to give back to the world as much as I have taken in the past.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been our intention in this paper to consider the relationship between religion, disability and health within the context of sporting participation and, in particular, in light of the experiences of elite (Paralympic) athletes. In so doing we have explored the interconnections between historical conceptions of sport and more contemporary arguments surrounding re-embodiment, and how religious/spiritual attachment might shape the lifestyle choices of disabled athletes.

In reflecting on the preceding discussion, a key point to consider is the IPC's dictum: *Inspire, Empower, Achieve*. To what extent, we might ask, can the values and ideals within the IPC be linked to Csordas' (2002) notion of transformation as part of a healing process? Certainly, personal empowerment is a central tenet of both. Indeed, it is clear that our respondents use their understanding of the world as a vehicle for addressing the age old question "Why me?". At the outset of the paper (and by way of personal vignette) we alluded to the escapism of fictional places where the impaired could lead alternate lives indicating that this might be one possible way of thinking about re-embodiment. As we have seen, it is

not uncommon for respondents such as ours to (initially) operate on a false sense of hope fuelled by notions of pending normality, fantasises which are slowly and gradually replaced by the practical (and often painful) realities of acceptance and adjustment. Yet the centrality of religion in these real life stories is not the product of fantasy. On the contrary, what is clear from the subjective accounts featured here is that religious faith provides these Paralympians with a new understanding of their position in the world; a liberation theology which targets injustice (Eiesland, 1994). In this sense, rather than languishing amidst the emotional (and sometimes physical) turmoil of impairment, these athletes take the symbolism associated with Christ's broken (and subsequently resurrected) body as a powerful and transformative means by which they (among others) can come to view their journey to re-embodiment afresh, as one of fate and destiny, as a road to emancipation, as a blessing in disguise. In this sense, these athletic bodies can be seen as being 'born again' and, as such, the Christian teachings and spiritual awakenings which underpin this transformative process may go at least some way to fuelling the flame of the Paralympic Games.

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