The Wounds that Might Heal

Scott Tinley, Ph.D.

> "Unless we die suddenly, we are all disabled eventually."
>
> Susan Wendell (1992, p. 66)

In the 2005 documentary, *Murderball*, a wheelchair-bound, rugby-playing protagonist claims, "I've actually done more in my wheelchair than I ever did with two legs." To the fellow physically-challenged athlete, the suggestion appears fair if not supportable.

My wound opened doors. One might consider and relate.

But to the able-bodied, the shallow thinking or the cynic, this claim is too often taken as willful self-deception—*You must not have done much before your injury*. *But, hey, do what you have to do*. And to those who by accident, grace or thoughtful consideration imagine that the character in this film about hard-hitting, world-class athletes must be speaking from the veracity of lived pathos, well, yours is the harder but higher road taken.

The sight of shirtless men butting heads and bodies in a violent game is standardized fare for American masculine ideology. Since Ancient Greece we have embraced the myth of the hyper hetero male at play; that ethos of heavy/sweaty contact doing its work. And the significance of the anthropometrically-perfect athlete is clear. For two thousand years we have seen and been sold their power. From Michelangelo's David to H&M Underwear's David Beckham, their wholeness is health we are told. We live in what Couser (2000) refers to as "the Empire of the Normal" swearing allegiance to the idealization of the abled.

Complicating the issue of (dis)empowered bodies is the stigma of individualism, that American ethos shot through with *don't-tread-on-me* patriotism. Our Founding Fathers, we are early taught, did not arrive on these shores in partial commitment or incomplete bodies. If anything, our feelings

toward the disabled are rife with paternalism—we don't discard our inferior, but we certainly don't treat them exactly the same. Thus we look upon the population as a kind of contagious anomaly or as Wendell (1992, p. 63) suggests, they signify the "threat of pain, imitation, dependency, and death."

The able bodied will make sure you don't starve. But they ain't going to pick you for their dodge ball team.

Still, the disabled population in America remains, by many estimates, over 40 million making it the largest minority group population. That's a lot of uh…irregular people doing regular things, many of which are of the physical and sporting variety. How are we to reimagine the place of the dis or under-abled when we have situated them firmly on the margins? The body politic then, is just that—politically infused with shifting paradigms of acceptance and denial on every level from elevator etiquette to government funding. And perhaps the most overtly interesting is seen in terminology. Euphemistic shifts from *crippled* to *differently abled* to *physically challenged* reflect an increasing acceptance through language if not in the facts of social institution.

And what about sports? What about those less-than-perfect athletes who compete at sports perhaps tougher than ours, who could kick our ass in Jui Jitsu or properly outfitted with a lightweight prosthetic, outsprint us at 100 yards or 26.2 miles? Challenging ancient ideas on *ableness* hangs in the air, crisp and telling, before landing with a distinct thud on our clichéd profiles.

Murderball was, in many ways, an over-reaching but effective catalytic challenge to our feelings toward the physically challenged athlete. Its hyperbolic display of aggressive play by the wheel-bound athlete is purposely meant to shove all notions of The Wounded in our face and to ask quite frankly: *Why does it bother you that these athletes have reached certain pugmarks of success beyond your own and they've done it while sitting in a damn chair?*

# # #

On Tuesday, May 21st, 2002, I came home from the hospital missing half of my nose. Basal cell carcinoma, lots of reconstructive surgery, and a note from a quadriplegic pal, Jim MacLaren.

"Hey Brother, it's only body parts. Now you're wounded like me." Attached to the smiley face on the note was one of Jim's draft essays he'd been working on in his graduate studies program at Pacifica University. The title was *The Mythology of Inflected Affliction* and I cringed just a little at the aggressive aca-speak as a few drops of blood dripped off my bandaged nose and onto the keyboard. But I respected this PC athlete more than most and dug in to the working narrative.

Jim's authentically imperfect piece had me on the two word sentence that opened the second paragraph: "Wounds communicate." And it would be some years later until I felt as if I understood his intent if not his inflection communicating to the world the meaning of his affliction. Jim was seen as a broken man. But he was more whole than most of my able-bodied buds. There was a shifting in his thoughts and emphasis from the body to the mind and the bridge over the chasm that was his wound constructed of something ephemeral. Call it the spirit, the soul, fate, destiny, God. Call it redemption and by any standard it's tough to measure. Jim MacLaren announced to the world that he was not his body, he was a man.

More than a decade later, the now-passed Yale grad whose amputee-to-quadriplegic injury was the impetus for origins of the San Diego-based non-profit group, Challenged Athlete Foundation (CAF.org) in the fall of 1993, we see how MacLaren's claim functions in our day-to-day challenge to reconstitute as normal, the wounded person. As Murphy (1987, pp. 116-117) suggests, the physically challenged or the generic Wounded, are "subverters of an American ideal...The disabled serve as constant, visible reminders to the able-bodied that the society they live in is shot through with inequality and suffering, that they live in a counterfeit paradise, that they too are vulnerable."

If the film, *Murderball* asks us to consider why we are confused by the normalized actions of the "afflicted" through wheelchair rugby, then MacLaren's

claim asked us to speak openly and honestly about that confusion, to communicate about what it means to live in an imperfect body in an imperfect world. *Pathography* is a good term—the study of artistic impression that evokes compassion.

# # #

The compassionate story of the Challenged Athlete Foundation began as a rag tag effort to flip the luck of Jim MacLaren. At 23 years old, his body DOA after being hit in the fall of 1985 by a NYC bus, Jim went on to set world records as a single leg amputee endurance athlete. Then, in an early California summer of 1993, the die cast came in the form of another four-wheeled menace. While competing in the bike segment of a triathlon, Jim was struck by a van, his body careening into a sign post, his C-6 vertebra and pseudo-normal life shattered.

Paraphrasing Jim's underdeveloped thesis, we begin with the idea that wounds—everything from the cut fingers of childhood to a life-changing severed spinal cord—allows us, if we accept it, to acknowledge the frailty of the human body. Stuff breaks. And we all have broken things hanging in our closets. Birthmarks, speech impediments, tattoos of old lovers on our butts…missing fingers and toes—embodied imperfections that speak at the volume which we allow them to influence our lives. There is power in talking about them.

Consider a conversation among elders at the local pharmacy:

"How's that new blood pressure medicine working for you, Ike?"

"Pretty well, Mable. And that metal hip? Are you setting off alarms at the airport?"

"Don't even think about it. I just turn my hearing aid off and let the plane cops deal with my problems."

Ike's hypertension and Mable's cobalt chromium joint are unique to them, existing in the most vulnerable of spaces. You could say they earned that

imperfection by virtue of survival, age or simply surviving age. But if their wounds enable communication among and about the afflicted they must also be considered a kind of celebration of individuality. *We're still here, living as best we can*.

Paul Martin argues in his 2002 memoir, *One Man's Leg* that his absent leg is what he celebrates most, that without his amputation he is just like every other able-bodied athlete. Willy Stewart, a record-setting endurance athlete who lost an arm in a college summer construction accident working on the Watergate Hotel, argues that, "it's exhausting to try and prove how regular I am among other athletes. I have one less arm but go just as hard and just as fast. We all need to just deal with it."

Dealing with it challenges us to understand the nature of the wounded and to develop the empathy of and for the afflicted; that unique *there but for the grace of God go I* self-talk that begins with the harsh reality that sometimes the world just does its work. The Bible. The Holocaust. The Grand Canyon. Michael Jordan. But thoughtful pathography also asks us to hover without pity for those whose lives went zig when a car or a germ or a mutant cell went zag. And in that naturally-occurring pathos, when the Wound extends to the six year old born without fibulas prancing on legs made of unobtanium and costing more than her grandmother's house, to the Hollywood-bound prom queen staring into the lens of a flesh-eating virus and loving who she has become, to the former national moto-x champion being lifted from his chair onto the saddle of a bike or some vehicle of his own making and riding fully whole for a lap or a day, we are challenged by the very meaning of the word "challenged." The wounded are not just their body, we remind ourselves, they just don't look like everyone else. And in some spirited dream or vision we try to realize in imagination and in fact that life don't stop when (enter body part here) don't work.

Many are the images of triumph over tragedy existing in global darkrooms waiting for development. But what role that imagined responsibility? It seems all the (il)logic safeguards and parochial governors need to fall purposely away for the able-bodied to engage with the afflicted on some neutral backdrop. The not-

yet-disabled often stand ably by on the sidelines with a gratuitous nod. A polite clap. A check for fifty dollars. Until we either find our neck in the noose or somehow feel the transcendence of their collective wound. Until the world does something else. And perhaps it's then when the abled begin to feel most what they disabled endeavor to feel least.

On October 19th of 1997 I fractured my C-6 vertebrae in an ego-driven mountain bike crash. Lying in a midnight ER, my head bolted to a cold steel gurney, the fear ran out of me. And it dripped through the linoleum floors, past the hospital foundation, past the dark earth and into the future of my past. And there it has lain, raising on occasion to remind me that there but for the grace of God…

That was just the world doing its thing, I'd imagined, but not before it spared me and cast its lot with another. The ghosts of Jim MacLaren and David Bailey and Willy Stewart and Mellanie Bend and Rudy Garcia Tolson remind me how nothing is fair, really. Still, I seek purchase in the eyes of the other afflicted, lucky and unlucky as they are.

# # #

In the fall of 2003, the CAF staged the10th anniversary of its San Diego Triathlon Challenge, an annual event begun in 1993 that rose $42,000 that year to buy MacLaren an adaptive van, another vehicle—he knew--releasing him from the prison of a small 3rd story rollup apartment with linoleum floors and a 24 inch balcony. That decade brought Jim clarity if not redemption. But there was time, he would say. In the first 10 years the Foundation had raised millions of dollars to help thousands of other PC athletes. Sometimes it was with a $5,000 carbon fiber running leg, sometimes it was a $50 race entry fee. People asked for what they thought would make a difference in their lives. Some times more, some times less. And CAF acted as conduit for the afflicted, brokering something between luck and fate, Eros and pathos.

That fall of 2003, Jim wheeled his grace around the upscale grounds of La Jolla Cove where the event begins and ends, an electric chair his pulpit, his cage, his own eyes seeking purchase in those that might not understand and be converted. He saw an older couple strolling along the wide seaside path. It was an early Sunday morning, mid-fall, and the verdant strip of grass next to the low, craggy La Jolla cliffs was abuzz. The man turned to his wife. They had the same inquisitive, somewhat uncomfortable look. Many of the people milling around the park were missing body parts, simple things like arms and legs, fingers, eyes.

In one corner of the park, MacLaren eyes a familiar face whose ability to twist and turn on itself in a unique contorting humor has made the man attached to it famous, recognizable, rich in material wealth. The man is speaking to a young woman in a similar wheel chair. Her own face is beautiful, the smile infecting the tall, thin movie star whose features at that moment are unable to hide what he feels. He must know at this moment that *she* is the star and Jim Carrey as cast, is just that…casted into a supporting role as participant.

The young woman rolls away in her chair. She is even more beautiful for the fact that she has no hands and no feet. She has to prepare for her swim in the Pacific Ocean by gathering up and installing the paddles on her shapely stumps, leaving Carrey to ponder his own fortune and fate. There are no cameras to capture the moment and no way to tell it anyway. Fame and fortune have nothing to do soul and grace, unless is has to do with accidental fortune funding grace and soul; people who've made great fortunes for reasons that only reason can know; capitalism extending fortune as only it can do.

The sun comes over the hills of coastal San Diego, illuminating the entire area, famous around the world as La Jolla—The Jewel. More people arrive, athletes nearly to a one; eight hundred and fifty of them plus or minus a multitude number of volunteers, family, and the just plain curious. The accidental tourists don't know what to make of it. It looks like a sporting event. There are bikes and bodies warming up, every imaginable size and shape. They eye a sign that says, "*Gimp crew check-in*."

Near a fence sits a young boy considering which legs to screw into his stumps as if he was deciding which colored lenses for his sunglasses on the day. Next to him a gaggle of onlookers push closer to hear the comedian, Robin Williams, berate fifteen year-old Rudy Garcia-Tolson for trying to look taller by choosing longer prostheses for his lower legs. It's like being able to choose breast size with an inflatable device; outward appearance controlled by internal device. Self-effacement is the rule. No egos allowed.

"I smile in reflection of the first Challenged Athlete Foundation event." Jim adjusts his sunglasses and surveys the building excitement around him. "Back then it was called The Jim MacLaren Fund. I *am* Jim MacLaren," he remembered. "The event was created to help *me*, just an average amputee with a lot of wonderful friends. But a more powerful aspect of this support surfaced."

What's that Jim?

"I am not my body. I am a man."

Jim and I listen to the announcer call out each and every name of the challenged competitors. Most of them appreciate the momentary limelight. I think that tomorrow morning at this time they will wake up in their homes, pull themselves out of a bed and into a chair, strap on a plastic hand, a graphite foot and go about their lives doing things we all do. They will drive to work or school, sell real estate, teach English, negotiate contracts, and make dinner. And they'll try with their every breath to forget the cards they have been dealt, sometimes succeeding, other times not.

For the moment though, they were off to do something that the vast majority of able-bodied folk will never even challenge themselves to do—a half-Ironman distance triathlon. For that day, and maybe forever, they are not disabled, just challenged. They are athletes. They are men and women facing their fears, accepting the task of riding their bike fifty miles with one leg or swimming an ocean mile without the use of the legs that are along for the ride.

"Goodness comes out of people for a day," MacLaren continues as a stream of well-wishers shake his clawed hand and tell him what he has to know—that he has made a difference

But he still can't get past the image of the old couple walking by, taking it all in, trying to figure out how these people can possibly run thirteen miles, as Jim Carrey is preparing to do. What must be going through their minds? Is this a race? A celebrity challenge? A religious revival? Or a reunion of bodily incompletes? They might ask but the only way to truly explain is to tell them to stick around and watch for themselves.

Suspend your disbelief, Jim wants to tell them, *see that sometimes body parts just get in the way when developing other important things. Remember that there were virtually no paralyzed veterans of WWI, that modern medicine will keep many of us alive long enough to live in a chair. Sooner or later,* he wants them to know*, you are just like me.*

Postscript: On October 20th of this year-2013-CAF will celebrate the 20th version of the San Diego Triathlon Challenge. Their role in changing the lives of the physically challenged athlete is unassailable. The numbers are in many zeros. And counting.

MacLaren, for his part, died in his sleep on August 31st of 2010. His mission was incomplete. His wound, however, allows him to communicate still.

Works Cited

Couser, G.T. (2000). The empire of the "normal": A forum on disability and self-representation—introduction. *American Quarterly* 52, 2:305-310

Murphy, R. (1987). *The body silent*. Henry Holt: New York.

Wendell, S. (1992). Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability. In *Feminist perspectives in medical ethics*. Bequaert Holmes, H. & Purdy, L.M., Eds. University Press: Bloomington, ID.