

In the heart of summer, it is a sporting persons wonderland. Wimbledon in tennis, the Tour de France in cycling, the Open Championship and the PGA Championship in golf, and this past week the World Track and Field Championships from London. Watching the athletes compete, one is witness to the amazing grace, beauty, speed, strength, and endurance of the human species. The variety of events highlight the differing gifts and strengths that exist and excite. For example, Mo Farah the 10,000 meter winner is a wisp compared to hulky Joe Kovacs the silver-medal-winning shot putter, and neither compare to the speed and strength of Tori Bowie, the 100 meter women's champion. Indeed, as we like to say at St. Francis, *Inclusive because Diversity was God's idea*. And the track and field championships has it all.

However, what struck me the most in watching the various races of the world championships was the wonderful model and tension for all of us between striving and relaxing. I suspect that we have all heard athletes and artists talk about all of the hard work that went into allowing them to be at the pinnacle of their event or discipline. We, perhaps, have also heard them speak about being in a place where they were able to allow the game or the dance or medium simply to come to them. At the height of their abilities and power, they talk about time slowing and their engagement in whatever their task is as something marked less by intense effort and more by fluidity and ease of motion, particularly--or perhaps, precisely-- at the highest level.

The beauty of races on the track is that this reality is on display for all to see. It is not that the winners are the ones who breeze away from the field and win going away. Rather, it's recognizing the miniscule difference between those who are working and striving with every step and each arm stroke, and those, who, for whatever reason and however they do it, seem to be gliding along even while they are in the intensity of the race, be it 100 meters, 400 meters, or 10,000 meters. Those who are able to relax while remaining engaged often are the ones who are able to perform better. When the margins that distinguish the fastest from the rest are just split seconds, it is easy to see that managing this striving/relaxing tension is a key to optimal performance.

I often think of this track image as a wonderful metaphor for our lives. How we train and practice and rehearse for all of the various things that we will do in life: work (of course), and also relationships, and avocations, and even rest. Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule for mastering something is a helpful guide. We need to put in some work to achieve competency. No doubt about it. No way around it either. Yet, as we develop, there exists this important distinction between striving and relaxing that we must, ultimately, attend to. If we only strive, we end up squeezing the very joy and beauty--not to mention potentially our best-- out of whatever it is that we do. If we only relax, we may never fully realize the joy and beauty--and certainly not our best--out of whatever it is that we do.

So, we live with this tension.

And, as with so many things, it usually is not one or the other. Indeed, it is both: striving and relaxing. Unfortunately, I often feel that our society and the culture that we are influenced by too often errs on the side of striving. Even within our religious traditions, we have made a sort of ultimate contest out of belief and faith. The need to believe the right thing. The need to fulfill all the requirements. The need, on the part of some, to absurdly declare who is “in” and who is “out” as if they were the final arbiter. While the first two are rooted in the best intentions, and, when I’m feeling forgiving, I feel that the last one is also rooted in a desire for order and understanding, just woefully misplaced. Regardless, all feed into the striver within us.

And I am not saying we should jettison that aspect of our person. However, I do think that the ability to relax is something that is also a part of our practice, perhaps even more important. As with the amazing athletes competing at the most intense, yet also finding a space to relax into all that they have worked on, so that they might more fully contend, I wonder if we too are invited to add this to our self-understanding of belief and faith. Primarily, I think this concept is captured in the words of Jesus to those around him in Matthew’s gospel, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin.” He says this in the context of inviting them not to be anxious for worldly things. (I have come to believe that the use of the word “spin” has profound implications for us who too often spin, and spin, and spin.:-)) He says this, so that they might focus more fully on the kingdom of God (or might we say the reality of God?).

Thus, they are not taken out of the world, but they are able to be less anxious--to *relax* as it were--in the world and in the activity of recognizing the reality of God not just at the end of all things, but, precisely, here and now. When we strive too much, we lose sight of that reality. We often think the world is on our shoulders. We are the ones who must fulfill everything. Jesus’ words are profound. He implies, in part, that the fulfilling has already been done. And, if this is true, then the character of our work is transformed. We still work. We still practice (10,000 hours and more). We still strive. Yet, we do so with the freedom that the ultimate is taken care of. The rest is gravy. And the race is, because of this, so much more fun.