How Life Imitates the World Series

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I. Introduction

In the movie “Bull Durham” about the minor league baseball team in Durham, North Carolina, the main female character, Annie Savoy (played by Susan Sarandon) confesses the following:

I believe in the Church of Baseball. I've tried all the major religions and most of the minor ones. I've worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan. I know things. For instance, there are 108 beads in a Catholic rosary and there are 108 stitches in a baseball. When I learned that, I gave Jesus a chance. [sigh] But it just didn't work out between us. The Lord laid too much guilt on me. I prefer metaphysics to theology. You see, there's no guilt in baseball, and it's never borin'

It's a long season, and you gotta trust it. I've tried them all, I really have. And the only church that truly feeds the soul day in, day out, is the Church of Baseball.

The title of this sermon is taken from an excellent book by the great baseball writer, Thomas Boswell. Boswell recognized the similarities between this sport and life in general. My talk today is not about baseball really, but about how it has been so embedded in American Culture, as well as some the lessons that baseball teaches us about life.

I told some friends of mine that I was giving a sermon on baseball and they looked at me funny and said, “well, that’s kind of a stretch”. I said, “hey, this is a Unitarian church where we look to all aspects of life to nurture our spirit”. To me, baseball has the power to inspire, create hope and drama, transfer wisdom, and provide a recurring sense of renewal that we all need to get through life.
II. Importance to Me

I’ll admit, I like baseball. My passion and deep appreciation of the sport has its roots in my early childhood in St. Louis, a City where baseball has had a long and illustrious history. Did you know that they played professional baseball in St. Louis the same day as Custer’s Last Stand in 1876?

When I was just a young lad, my dad would take me out to see the Cardinals play at Sportsman’s Park and later to Busch Stadium. We didn’t have much in common, except the love of baseball. So this was a time for me to bond with him. My dad signed me up to play ball when I was in 1st Grade. We didn’t win a single game that first year. I learned a lot about losing and not getting discouraged. I continued to play baseball every year up through high school when I discovered I couldn’t hit a really good curveball.

As a kid I spent endless hours playing baseball board games, collecting baseball cards, playing pick-up games with friends, and of course watching and listening to Cardinal games.

I umpired Little League games during graduate school in Manhattan, Kansas and for a couple of years after I got my first job here in KC to earn some extra money.

In 1988 I took a History of Baseball class at UMKC that was taught by Lloyd Johnson who had previously been a historian with the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown.

A number of years ago I started a tradition in my family where my dad, my two brothers and I would go on an annual weekend Baseball Trip to various ballparks around the country. We got to a number of cities until my dad was no longer able to
travel. He passed away five years ago. I could tell he was near the end when he lost his interest in the Cardinals. Now it’s just us three brothers.

So, as I said, I like baseball, ...but why?

I think it connects me with my childhood and it appeals to my interests in sports, history, science, art, statistics, drama, the outdoors, interesting people, and having fun. In other words...life.

III. Importance to You

I’m sure some of you here today are equally passionate about Baseball, and many others derive a great deal of enjoyment from it, especially now that the Royals are playing so well. Baseball provides an opportunity to spend time with your family and friends, daily entertainment, coaching opportunities, and opportunities to meet new friends.

And of course there are others who couldn’t care less.

IV. Importance in American Culture

Baseball is deeply intertwined with American History. However, it actually evolved from the British games of Cricket and “rounders” as well as a number of other games of ball played by children in the late 18th Century. By the early 19th Century simple, informal games of ball were being played on village greens and college campuses throughout New England but especially around New York.

On June 19, 1846 Alexander Cartwright led the Knickerbocker Baseball Club of New York to play the New York Nine on an open tract of land fronting the Hudson River known poetically as the Elysian Field, which is regarded as the first modern baseball game. The Knickerbockers were a social club as much engaged in food and drink as
playing the game. The first rules of the game were first written in 1848. They are not very different from the current rules with a few exceptions. For example you could get a runner out by hitting him with the ball (which was much softer back then) and an out could be recorded if a fielder caught the ball on one hop.

Baseball’s rules are unique in many aspects. For example the foul lines extend out indefinitely so technically the field is infinite. But like our legal system, the laws are constantly being re-interpreted when new situations arise. For example, in the late 1800’s the rule stated that a “substitution could be made at ant time during a game”. So the player-manager of the Chicago White Stockings (King Kelly) when a pop foul came near his team’s bench, apparently out of reach of his first baseman, yelled “Kelly in for Brooks” and he subsequently caught the ball. The umpires ruled it a legal catch. The rule was changed after that.

Baseball even has its creation myth just like many religions. The myth was a hoax created by one of the promoters of the game and peddler of sporting goods, A. G. Spaulding, in order to insure the origin of the game to be truly American. In this myth Abner Doubleday, a decorated military officer, was said to have designed the game pretty much in its present form in Cooperstown, N.Y. in 1839. Not true, but it’s a good story.

In the middle of the 19th Century the sport rapidly gained popularity and soon many towns in the northeast had their own team. It was a real source of civic pride.

The game spread across the country in large part because of the Civil War when soldiers would play it during downtimes and then would take the sport back to their hometown after the war.

As the game’s popularity continued to grow it led to the development of a significant professional sports business. Between 1876 and 1902 there were as many as six major league circuits that arose to take advantage of the sport’s fan attraction. The
National League was the first in 1876, and the American League was the last, in 1900. And of course those two remain to this day.

Why did baseball resonate so well with the American people?

Mark Twain noted:

Baseball has become “the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century

For those born in America, particularly in cities, the game, whether watched or played, recalled the earlier, rural America, a more youthful, less bitterly knowing country; for the immigrant, the game was a club to belong to, another fraternal organization, a common language in a strange land.

The game had the ability to cross social classes. For the working man it was cheap to watch, cheap to play. The players themselves tended to come from working class America and the game became rough, profane, strenuous, more exciting and so did the crowds. But it was also played in schools and on college campuses. The educated and well-to-do never lost their taste for baseball.

Of course if you couldn’t play, you could always read about it. Henry Chadwick, an early player, who is responsible for many of the rules as they were originally set down, also created the box score for keeping track of individual and team performances in a game. He also became baseball’s first great evangelist, who devoted his writings to promote baseball as a morally pure and uniquely American enterprise. Over the years, Baseball writers such as Grantland Rice, brought color and drama and human stories to the fans which helped fans feel like they had a personal relationship with the players.
With the advent of radio in the 1930s and television in the 1950s baseball could reach into people’s living rooms, which greatly expanded its impact on the nation.

But beyond just the entertainment value of the sport, there seems to have been a much deeper connection to the American psyche.

In an essay entitled, “Baseball as Civil Religion: The Genesis of an American Creation Story” by Christopher Evans, Evans argues that baseball has served as a form of a religion in America. He uses the term, “civil religion”, in describing how Americans have created a collective national identity through bestowing sacred meaning in a variety of secular symbols, rituals, and institutions. Such attributes can be applied to baseball.

The late Bart Giamatti (Commissioner of Baseball 1988-89 and President of Yale University) wrote these words relating baseball to the core values of American culture:

\[
To \text{ know baseball is to continue to aspire to the condition of freedom, } \\
\text{ individually and as a people, for baseball is grounded in America in a way } \\
\text{ unique to our games.}
\]

It is clear that for Giamatti, baseball has the qualities of what scholars have defined as “civil religion.” That is why the “Black Sox” scandal of 1919 where certain players on the Chicago White Sox colluded with gamblers and threw the World Series to the Reds, shook the sport as well as the country to its foundations. The integrity of the game had to be maintained. And those players were banned from baseball for life.

Baseball also has its resurrection stories. Every year teams have an opportunity to come back from the dead and start over. Until this past year the Royals were in that group. This year, the Houston Astros are the “Lazarus” team. There is a sense of renewal, just like nature.
Of course we all know about baseball’s role in breaking down racial barriers. Prior to 1946, only white men were allowed to play in the major leagues. We are all well aware of the story of Jackie Robinson and the tremendous effort it took for him to withstand the comments and threats made when he became the first black player in the major leagues.

Even after Jackie broke through there was still public push-back to limit the number of black players on each team. In fact, Lou Brock was traded from the Chicago Cubs to the St. Louis Cardinals because there were already two black outfielders on the team and Cubs management felt that that was the limit that their fans would tolerate. Nonetheless, the integration of baseball helped to open the gates for the Civil Rights Movement.

Of course, as of today, women do not participate in the sport at the major league level. Although I am impressed by the fact that at least one credit card company (Capital One) advertises “where will you be” when the first woman pitches in the Major Leagues. I suspect we will see that at some time in the future.

It is thought that if a woman makes it to the major leagues it would likely be as a specialty pitcher, such as a knuckleballer, that doesn’t require as much arm strength. Interestingly, there were actually three women who played in the old Negro Leagues.

And of course baseball has not been immune from the history of labor strife in this country. In fact, the Major League Players Association has been one of the strongest unions in America. The ability of that union and the efforts of individuals such as the Cardinals’ Curt Flood in the 1960s to break the “reserve clause” allowing free agency has been one of the most significant events in the sport’s history. Prior to that, players were practically the slaves of team owners who had controlling rights to the players and could pretty much pay them whatever they felt they were worth.
And of course baseball has had its great sages, such as Yogi Berra:

“You can observe a lot by watching”
“If there’s a fork in the road, take it”
“You got to be careful, if you don’t know where you are going you might not get there”
“It ain’t the heat, it’s the humility”
“90 percent of the game is half-mental”
“We made too many wrong mistakes”

Seventh Inning Stretch

And now, before I continue with my sermon I’d like you all to rise if you are able for the 7th Inning Stretch. Please join me in singing “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.”

V. Lessons in Life

So...what lessons can we draw from such a sport as baseball? Can it inform our spiritual journey through life? I think in some ways it can.

The conservative columnist, George Will, who has written frequently on the sport of baseball, claimed that baseball affected his political persuasion. He grew up in central Illinois midway between St. Louis and Chicago. While all of his friends were becoming Cardinal fans, he became a Cubs fan. Rooting for them in the 1940s and early 1950s he says he became gloomy, pessimistic, morose, dyspeptic, and conservative.

One of the things I love about baseball is the fact that it is played every day, just like life. There are good days and bad days, but tomorrow is a new day. Success and failure only last for 24 hours. So don’t get too high or too low.
Baseball teaches us that to be successful in life you have to work at it every day. In fact George Will says that:

*Baseball is a craft. The relentless and successful pursuit of excellence. There is a direct connection between the amount of luck you have and the work you do.*

The game can also create role models or heroes for our kids. These are individuals who through their exemplary work ethic, physical effort, team-first attitude, charitable giving or words of wisdom for our youth. Think of Roberto Clemente, Lou Gehrig, Stan Musial, Kirby Puckett, Derek Jeter, Alex Gordon.

And then there is the timelessness of the sport:

*The game comes from an America where the availability of sun defined the time for work and play—nothing else. Virtually all our other sports reflect a time clock, either in their formal structure or their definition of a winner. Baseball views time as if it were an endless available resource; it may put a premium on speed, of throw or foot, but it is unhurried.—B. Giamatti*

Interestingly, the amount of actual time when action is occurring varies greatly between sports. In baseball, in a typical three-hour game there is actually only 18 minutes of action. You think that’s bad, football has only 11 minutes of action. You can understand why advertisers love these sports.

I also like the egalitarian nature of baseball. You can succeed whether you are 6 foot eleven like the Royals pitcher Chris Young or the Houston Astros star Jose Altuve at 5 foot 6, or have a larger girth like Prince Fielder, or are from the poorest country in the world or attended an Ivy League school. Ballplayers come in all shapes and sizes, and ethnic or economic backgrounds.

The game has a way of building character through individual accountability. Stephen Jay Gould, the late great paleontologist and huge baseball fan pointed out that:
Players are sufficiently physically separated on the field so that the individual cannot hide from clear responsibility for his actions...

Baseball teaches us to overcome our fears. Again Bart Giamatti:

Individual merit and self-reliance are the bedrock of baseball, never more than in the fundamental acts of delivering, and attempting to hit, the ball. ... there is the basic confrontation between two lone individuals. A man on a hill prepares to throw a rock at a man slightly below him, not far away, who holds a club. First, fear must be overcome; no one finally knows where the pitched ball ...will go. ... Occasionally, suddenly, usually unaccountably, the primitive act of throwing... results in terrible injury. The fear is never absent.... If hitting a major league fastball is the most difficult act in organized sport, the difficulty derives in part from the need to overcome fear in a split second.

It also teaches us to deal with adversity. In baseball a very good hitter fails seven out of ten times. But in baseball that could get you to the All-Star game. So dealing with failure is a real skill that baseball teaches us. In the great poem, “Casey at the Bat”, by Ernest Lawrence Thayer the story appears to be building toward a dramatic and exciting conclusion when the crowd is ultimately let down. “But there is no joy in Mudville -- mighty Casey has struck out.”

It kinda reminds me of Salvy Perez popping up in foul territory to end the Royals season last year with the tying runner (Alex Gordon) at third base.

Another lesson from baseball is its use of statistics or probabilities. The final outcome of any pitch is unknown but decisions are made based on an underlying understanding of all the probabilities that relate to a certain situation.
It’s almost mindboggling, the factors that are considered on every pitch: beginning with the selection of the type and location of the pitch by the catcher, the ability of the pitcher to throw the ball as requested, the strength of the hitter to guess the pitch and location, the positioning of the fielders based on the tendencies of the hitter to hit that type of pitch, the speed and direction of the wind, the location of other runners, the inning and score, etc., etc., etc. It’s like human chess. And it’s just like life. If more people had a better sense of probabilities, they would make better decisions.

The physics of Baseball also teaches us about the world. A round bat must strike a round ball in such a way that it proceeds into fair territory at enough speed to elude a fielder or be beyond their ability to throw to the base. The effect of the seams on the flight of the pitch; the subtle ways a knuckleball, which is devoid of spin, can dance in the air currents before reaching the catcher’s glove; the transfer of energy from the bat to the ball based on the location on the bat that the ball strike; the route of the outfielder to intersect with the trajectory of the ball in flight; the type of wood in the bat (maple or ash).

And then there is the pure artistic beauty of the sport…the color of the uniforms, the green grass, the neatly painted lines, the expanse of the ballpark, the blue sky or stars, the sound of the organ, the crack of the bat meeting ball, the pop of the ball in the catcher’s mitt and the dance that takes place when the infielders turn a double play. In the words of Royals commentator Rex Hudler…”It’s a beautiful thing”

And then there is the humor surrounding baseball. George Carlin characterized the difference between Baseball and Football this way:

*Baseball begins in the spring, the season of new life. Football begins in the fall, when everything is dying. In Football, you wear a helmet. In Baseball, you wear a cap. Football is concerned with downs. What down is it? Baseball is concerned*
with ups. Who’s up? Are you up? I’m not up. He is up. In Football, you receive a penalty. In Baseball, you make an error. Whoops!

Baseball has a 7th inning stretch. Football has the two minute warning. Baseball has no time limit. We don’t know when it’s gonna end. We might have extra innings. Football is rigidly timed and it will end even if we have to go to sudden death.

And finally the objectives of the two games are totally different. In Football, the object is for the quarterback, otherwise known as the field general. To be on target with his aerial assault riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz even if he has to use the shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing his aerial assault with a sustained ground attack, which punches holes in the forward wall of the enemies’ defensive line. In Baseball, the object is to go home, and to be safe. I hope I’ll be safe at home, safe at home.

In the end it’s all about going home.

V. Conclusion

So I hope I have at least given you some ideas about the uniqueness of the sport of baseball and its role as perhaps a true civil religion in America.

Benediction

“Baseball, it is said, is only a game. True. And the Grand Canyon is only a hole in Arizona. Not all holes or games are created equal” - - George Will

Go out and enjoy this day, relax, take in a ballgame. And root for your favorite team. It’s good for the soul.