

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Professional sports and the challenge to the sacred trust. In recent times, professional sports in America have taken a hard hit.

In the NBA (National Basketball Association), it's the egregious gambling scandal involving referee Tim Donaghy—betting on actual NBA games, even games he has officiated. In the NFL (National Football League), it's the dog-fighting upheaval implicating Atlanta Falcon's quarterback, Michael Vick—along with a rash of animal cruelty allegations as well. In the MLB (Major League Baseball), it's the *presumed* steroids use of slugger Barry Bonds and others (although Bonds has never tested positive for steroids) resulting in *bulked up* numbers in virtually every statistical category.

What's really at stake here (as NBA Commissioner David Stern noted in a televised statement) is the *sacred trust* implicit in sports across the board. Inherent to the idea of sport is the assumption that players and teams *play by the rules*. That's part of the deal. When athletes cheat, they violate a fundamental trust that is integral to the sport, a trust that athletes and fans count on.

Put another way, the *spirit* of sport is violated when the competitors cheat. The whole meaning of the *games that we play* is undermined. Performances are altered, therefore affecting final outcomes.

The sacred trust. If we think about it, there's a certain *sacred trust* in all of life. We assume, we *trust*, that people are going to comport themselves in a particular way.

In community life, there's the *trust* of some level of common civility, decency and good manners. There are always exceptions of course, but for the most part, most people indeed *are* civil, decent and reasonably well-mannered.

In the business community, there are certain, implicit standards of honesty and personal honor. Many business transactions are carried out, in their initial stages, with a hand shake and a verbal agreement. There's a *sacred trust* that transcends the legalese that eventually comprises the final contract or agreement. Many business persons will not do business with persons who do not live up to this implicit code.

However, it's in the world of sport where *trust* is perhaps given its biggest test. In tennis, it's the line calls; in golf, it's playing your ball where it lies and counting all your strokes; and in all sports it's rejecting the use of performance enhancing drugs, drugs that give the athlete an unfair advantage over their competition.

In the big picture of life, the *sacred trust* aims for the spiritual high ground. It seeks to lift up the best, the most noble in the human spirit and celebrate it for what it is. The goal

of sport is always to win, but to win in the right way—honoring the trust that is implied in the competition.

Winning that's really winning. When the final buzzer sounds and the dust has settled, winning can never involve *cheating*, no matter the scoreboard result. We either win *right*, or we don't win at all. The scoreboard only has meaning when the *sacred trust* is honored and upheld.

To win on the scoreboard, but dishonorably, is worse than losing. Is O. J. Simpson *really* free? The courts said *yes*, but will he ever awake to a day when the clouds of guilt, dishonor and absence of character do not hover overhead?

Barry Bonds will no doubt pass the magical 755 lifetime homeruns of homerun king Henry Aaron; but will Bonds ever be able to stride through life, head held high, basking in the adulation and admiration of the multitudes?

Part of what all of this suggests is that if we don't have our honor, our fundamental integrity and character, what do we have?

Always, *the spiritual high ground* beckons. It invites us to see the *big picture* of our lives, the picture that includes every human being. It invites us to aim high in our relations with one another. But more still, it invites us to live lives that ennoble the best in the human spirit, that God's purposes might be realized both in us and through us.