

A LITTLE FURTHER

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Given the brief snowstorm that swept through the city last night, you may have had a fleeting taste of being an Olympic athlete as you made your way to church this morning. For my part, I'm delighted that you made it to the finish line — the sanctuary at All Souls. For nearly two centuries, this community of purpose and practice has been a regular destination for spiritual seekers.

Against a backdrop of bitter cold and high winds, the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang have showcased individual purpose and practice in a different way. Seventeen-year-old American Red Gerard's dazzling performance in the final run of the men's snowboard slopestyle competition catapulted him from last place to first place and captured the gold. American Jamie Anderson, who won the women's snowboard slopestyle gold four years ago in Sochi, delivered another gold medal performance in PyeongChang by improvising her way down the windy course.

Each of these world's-best performances lasted less than a minute, but they represent athletic commitments that span many years — practicing for hours each day, bouncing back from losses in competitions along the way, recovering from the inevitable injuries. Especially for veteran athletes like 33-year-old American skier Lindsay Vonn, who entered competition in PyeongChang as the most decorated woman skier in history, the bone-deep determination to climb back after numerous nearly-debilitating injuries over the years has made the difference. Vonn says she has looked for inspiration to her grandfather, who died last fall. Grandpa Don, as she calls him, introduced her to skiing and passed on his work ethic, a legacy of his lifetime in the construction business. According to Vonn, he often said to her, "You better become friends with pain because you're going to have it your entire life."

For good reason, the life of an athlete has often been invoked as an analogy of the spiritual life. Both require a clear sense of purpose and a long commitment in the same direction. Indeed, various passages in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures compare the spiritual journey to athletic pursuits, such as running a race or climbing a mountain. Perhaps the best-known expression of this relationship can be found in John Bunyan's allegory *Pilgrim's Progress*, which he penned more than three centuries ago. Besides the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress* is the best-selling book in English of all time. Though Bunyan tells his tale in terms of the Christian life, his insights hold true for any spiritual seeker.

Pilgrim's Progress describes a man named, not surprisingly, Christian, who undertakes a long and often tortuous journey from what Bunyan calls the wilderness of this world to the Celestial City. Christian begins his journey over the objections of his

family, as well as his neighbors on either side, who go by the names Pliable and Obstinate. Christian's mettle is further tested in encounters with people like Mr. Worldly Wiseman, who lives in a town called Carnal Policy. Mr. Money-love and Mr. Hold-the-World tempt him in a different way, as do three hapless fellows named Simple, Sloth, and Presumption.

Christian also passes through places like the Valley of Humiliation, the Slough of Despond, and, of course, the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He survives Doubting Castle, which is home to a giant named Despair, and he resists the allure of a town called Vanity Fair, a spectacle of ostentation and frivolity that had not yet been turned into a magazine. Occasionally along the way, Christian finds solace and rest, like the night he spends in Palace Beautiful, where a woman named Discretion lives with her daughters: Prudence, Piety, and Charity.

Early on in the story, we discover the secret of Christian's eventual success. While traveling in the company of two men named Formalist and Hypocrisy, Christian comes to the foot of a hill called Difficulty, at the bottom of which he finds a spring. When Formalist and Hypocrisy see that the hill ahead is steep and high, they resolve to find an easier path to follow. One turns onto a path that leads into a great wood; unbeknownst to him, the name of that path is Danger. The other turns onto a path that leads into a great wide field; this path is called Destruction.

Christian, however, resolves to follow a narrow path that goes straight up the hill. After refreshing himself at the spring, he begins the trek, saying to himself along the way:

The hill, though high, I covet to ascend;
The difficulty will not me offend;
For I perceive the way to life lies here:
Come, pluck up, heart, let's neither faint nor fear.
Better, though *difficult*, the right way to go,
Than wrong, though *easy*, where the end is woe.

To climb the hill of life takes both purpose and commitment — a sense of where you're going and the discipline to keep headed that way. Come, pluck up, heart, let's neither faint nor fear. For I perceive the way to life lies here.

The current issue of *The New Yorker* magazine contains a story by David Grann about Henry Worsley, who several years ago attempted to trek on foot from one side of Antarctica to another. His route would extend more than a thousand miles through perhaps the most brutal environment in the world, passing through the South Pole along the way. Worsley, a retired British Army officer who had served in an elite commando unit, had also become a leading authority on Ernest Shackleton, the renowned explorer of Antarctica. A century earlier, Shackleton had tried and failed to traverse Antarctica as part of a large expedition. Worsley intended to do it alone — no

one to accompany him, and no dogs to help him pull his sled initially laden with 325 pounds of food and other supplies.

Two months into his solo trek, Worsley had traveled more than 800 miles. By that time, Grann writes, “Virtually every part of him was in agony. His arms and legs throbbed. His back ached. His feet were blistered and his toenails were discolored. His fingers had started to become numb with frostbite... He was on the verge of collapse. Yet he was never one to give up.”

One of the things that kept Worsley going was a slogan he and his comrades would repeat when their commando unit was under duress. The slogan was taken from a line of poetry, and Worsley had painted it on the front of his sled. As he walked, Worsley murmured the slogan to himself like a mantra: “Always a little further, a little further. Always a little further, a little further.”

Whether you are careening down a snowy slope or crossing an icy wilderness, whether you are developing your spiritual intention or climbing your spiritual mountain, you need purpose and commitment. One more run down the slope. One more step up the mountain. One more pause to renew your intention. One more prayer to deepen your purpose. Always a little further, a little further. The form commitment takes, no matter the arena of endeavor, is often called practice.

I am reminded of a passage in the book *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science* by Atul Gawande, a Harvard-trained surgeon who also writes for *The New Yorker*. Gawande says, “In surgery, as in anything else, skill and confidence are learned through experience — haltingly and humiliatingly. Like the tennis player and the oboist and the guy who fixes hard drives, we need practice to get good at what we do.”

Because surgeons learn in this way, Gawande says, they believe in practice, not talent. According to him, you don't even need to have great hands to become a surgeon. Of course, talent helps, and once in a while someone truly gifted comes along — someone who picks up complex manual skills unusually quickly and can see trouble coming before it happens. Nonetheless, Gawande says, “attending surgeons say that what's most important to them is finding people who are conscientious, industrious, and bone-headed enough to stick at practicing this one difficult thing day and night for years on end... Skill, surgeons believe, can be taught; tenacity cannot.”

Tenacity also enables performers in other fields to excel. Gawande cites studies of violinists, ice-skaters, mathematicians, and other elite performers. The biggest difference researchers find between them and lesser performers is the cumulative amount of practice they've had. It turns out that top performers dislike practicing just as much as others do. But more than others, top performers have the will to keep practicing anyway.

In other words, whether you are a would-be snowboarder, a would-be saint, or a would-be surgeon, life requires daily practice to express your purpose and embody your

commitment. The road is long and often hard. The practice keeps you moving toward your goal. The key is tenacity: never give up.

Committing to a practice also means you can place some things beyond the purview of your day-to-day choices. Faithful Muslims never stop to ask whether they are going to pray at noon. They just pray. Christian didn't pause each morning to see if there was another destination that looked more appealing or less strenuous. He just kept going. Red Gerard, Jamie Anderson, and Lindsey Vonn don't decide each day whether to practice or not. They just do it.

If we ask ourselves each day whether or not we want to do something that takes a lot of effort, the answer will sometimes — and maybe often — be no. The key is not to ask the question. Don't decide. Just do what needs to be done. Go to the gym. Do the work. Make a list of your friends and call one each day. Spend time each day in meditation and reflection. Whatever the journey, it begins with a distant goal, and it proceeds each day with the discipline of practice, come what may.

In Bunyan's tale, Christian eventually made it to the top of the mountain. Henry Worsley did not succeed in his effort to traverse Antarctica on foot alone. Time will tell whether Lindsey Vonn will add to her stash of Olympic medals. But by moving a little further each day toward their goals, each gave themselves a chance of reaching them.

Time will also tell whether you and I will make progress on the commitments we have made, whether personal, emotional, professional, or spiritual. Time will tell whether we have the purpose and practice to push a little further each day. My prayer for all of us is that the answer will be yes. Just a little further, a little further.