

"Another View"
Op-Ed essays



THOMAS DAILEY, O.S.F.S.

Director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture

Play cannot be replaced by a pill

August 11, 2008

published in *The Morning Call* newspaper (Lehigh Valley, PA)

CENTER VALLEY - With the onset of training camps for Fall sports, a proverbial mantra can again be heard: "no pain, no gain." Coaches implore athletes with various motivational cues to put in the effort that will reap long-term benefit. The grunts and groans, the aches and pains, the sweat and exhaustion are seasonal signs that point to a dedication to improve.

One look in the stands, however, reveals a different scenario. Among those past their playing prime, or those not yet old enough to participate, the population of spectators is growing, at least in terms of their waists. According to the statistical sourcebook published by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the American Heart Association, 65 percent of all people age twenty and older are overweight or obese, as are 16 percent of children and teens. Unfortunately, the trend for both groups is rapidly rising.



["A Nation at Risk: Obesity in the United States"](#)

Two recent news items offer some response to this national gut-check. One story concerned the new guidelines for cardiovascular health in children issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics. While supporting healthful diets for the entire population, the updated policy also targets at-risk youngsters, for whom being overweight or having a family history of obesity remains a significant risk factor. A recommendation for those children susceptible to coronary disease is that their cholesterol levels should be tested beginning after age two; and for those in whom cholesterol levels are unhealthy, prescription drugs should be considered as an intervention beginning at age eight.

The more tantalizing story comes from researchers at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, who have apparently created a substitute for sweat. Having identified the critical genetic pathways in laboratory mice, they produced two pills that mimic the effects of burning fat and boosting endurance. After only four weeks of ingesting the drugs, and

without any prior training, their rodents ran 44 percent longer than other mice. Opining the potential for humans, the lead researcher exclaimed, “If you don’t like exercise, you love the idea of getting the benefits from a pill.”

Pharmacological agents have obviously improved our condition. Indeed, they may even be necessary medicine for those who cannot otherwise control genetic dispositions to disease (as my internist will attest). But pills are no panacea. And because health is a human good greater than simply physiological fitness, our nation at risk would benefit not only from more physical activity but also from a renewed social emphasis on play.

In this cultural context, play encompasses more than merely physical activity that overcomes inertia, valuable as that might be for the growing number of couch potatoes. So, too, play is bigger than physiological concern for aerobic fitness or muscle tone, nice as it might be to have those six-minute abs.

Play is what the philosophers deem an autotelic activity, one whose sole purpose is contained in itself. It usually involves some physical activity, thus distinguishing it from mere idleness (and thereby providing some health benefit). But the activity we call play is defined as such by being freely chosen for its own sake, something more desirable than necessary, more enjoyable than useful. In this respect, play is contrasted with work and the culture of business that absorbs the vast majority of our time, and risks absorbing our very selves in the process.

Play responds not only to the physiological need for activity but also to the religious longing of the human spirit. As A. Bartlett Giamatti, the former baseball commissioner, once wrote, taking the physical acts of toil and turning them into means of play “is to replicate the arena of humankind’s highest aspiration. That aspiration is to be taken out of the self.” Beyond the avoidance of inertia wisely counseled by healthcare advocates, or the enabling of endurance chemically activated by laboratory researchers, play opens us to what Giamatti calls the “condition of paradise ... a dream of ourselves better than we are, back to what we were.”



Computer games may replicate sport with life-like animation, but leaving the toy behind to go and run on a field should be a child’s delight. Watching a game may bring joy to older fans, but a brisk walk around the park would do us all more good. A pill may reduce our health risks, but learning (or learning again) how just to play will be our best reward - for both body and soul.
