Spotting the Ground

By Michael Spencer

I loved watching the Summer Olympic Games in 2021, and two moments stood out. The first was when Simone Biles withdrew from the gymnastic team's competition. It was certainly a self-focused act, and for all the right reasons. Biles said she had "the twisties" — a nice-sounding phrase meaning that she had lost the ability to spot the ground, and therefore was in grave danger.

Biles, the most amazing gymnast of any generation, whose routines are in a class of their own, withdrew from competition because she listened to her body, she focused on her mental health, she made the call when she felt it wasn't safe, and she stepped back so that her teammates could step forward and, in Sunisa Lee's case, win the gold. Simon Biles also realized something about her self-worth: "I've realized that I'm more than my accomplishments and gymnastics, which I never truly believed before." She showed what courage looks like beyond a gold medal.

The second moment was from Molly Seidel, the young woman who won bronze in the Olympic Marathon, which was only the third marathon in her life. During an interview in June 2021, she talked about her obsession with running — and it's truly an obsession, as Seidel suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder. In a lengthy interview, she talked about entering a rehabilitation program to deal with her OCD and her obsession with running.

What she learned was that her mind would often take over and overwhelm her body. She would become obsessed by her thoughts, to the detriment of her health. So, she started a practice of mindfulness. Now, when she runs, she gets out of her head, she goes with the flow: "You just need to focus on putting one foot in front of the other, being in the moment. Just keep running."

Simone Biles and Molly Seidel are living representations of the last line in today's reading: "The only way to go is definitely to grow." It comes from a wonderful remark about the good life, from the writings of Dr. Samuel Drury, the fourth headmaster of St. Paul's (1911-38). Dr. Drury shifted this culture. For many years, St. Paul's — like so many other boarding schools in the 19th and early 20th centuries — was a place exclusively for the privileged. It was a place for what I like to call the peacocks of society, who wished to educate their young away from the grime of 19th-century industrial cities.

Dr. Drury had been a missionary in the Philippines. He had worked as the rector of a church in a poor Boston neighborhood, and he abhorred excess, preciousness, and entitlement. He was the pelican to the school's peacocks. He chose the pelican as the school mascot, representing sacrifice, the commitment to a greater good. The pelican was the symbol of his vision for this school, which he thought could be a brighter beacon for a world that needed more light. He held up the virtue of sacrifice through the tumultuous time of World War I, the 1918 pandemic, the Great Depression, and the beginning of World War II.

Going and growing are at the heart of what we do as a school. We are all works in progress. Sometimes, like Simone Biles, we might have the twisties, we might have trouble spotting the ground. Sometimes, like Molly Seidel, we might have trouble getting out of our heads. But this chapel service is a time to spot the ground, time to get off our phones and out of our heads and into the communal moment of being part of something greater than ourselves.

The goal is not perfection, but the honest striving for it. As Martin Luther once wrote: "This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road."

We are all walking the road, going and growing toward a vision that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called beloved community. Like Dr. Drury, in a time of trial and tragedy, Dr. King spoke to a nation that had become twisted: "the end [of our work] must be reconciliation; the end must be redemption; the end must be the creation of the beloved community."

This should never be a school of puffed-up, exalting peacocks. Rather, it must be the place where the pelicans of sacrifice find their home. This year, as we lean into our common life together, as we gather in this place to spot the ground and get out of our heads, as we build beloved community in this chapel and in this school, we can hold on to hope, we can promote civil discourse, consider perspectives different from our own, enter into harmonious disagreement, and always cultivate a Midas touch of thoughtfulness.

Our worth will not be measured by what we do, but rather by who we really are: loved deeply by the God who does not care how cleverly we twist and turn in the air, but rather is focused on how well we keep our eyes on the ground of the good life.

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