

READINGS for August 20:

From George Will

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.

**from *The Green Fields of the Mind*
by A. Bartlett Giamatti**

It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone. You count on it, rely on it to buffer the passage of time, to keep the memory of sunshine and high skies alive, and then just when the days are all twilight, when you need it most, it stops.

OPENING WORDS by *Becky Edmiston-Lange*

Come in. Come into this place which we make happy by our presence.

*Come in with all your vulnerabilities and strengths, fears and anxieties, loves and hopes.
For here you need not hide, nor pretend, nor be anything other than who you are and are called to be.*

Come into this place where we can touch and be touched, heal and be healed, forgive and be forgiven.

Come into this place, where the ordinary is sanctified, the human is celebrated, the compassionate is expected.

Come into this place. Together we make it a holy place.

**The Dog Days
By Don Southworth
ERUUF
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A. Bartlett Giamatti had a Ph. D in Comparative Literature. He was the President of Yale University from 1978-1986. He gave up that job to become the president of the National League of Major League Baseball. For five months before his death in 1989, he served as the Commissioner of Baseball. He claimed it was the best career move of his life.

The words Mary read this morning begin his essay, *The Green Fields of the Mind*. For people like me who love the game and all its spiritual subtlety, they describe much more than baseball. “It breaks your

heart. It is designed to break your heart.” Such is the nature of baseball ...and often, such is the nature of life.

These days when millionaire players and billionaire owners fight and threaten strikes, when we read stories of players – heroes to many kids and some adults - throwing bats at umpires or using steroids to inflate their bodies and their statistics, it is easy to scoff at someone who compares baseball with life. Some of my friends, colleagues and former congregants have told me that when I wax philosophical about the metaphors and lessons baseball teaches us, that they just do not get it. I feel sorry for anyone who has not been captured – yet - by the magic, the mystery and the wonder of baseball. Maybe I can help. This morning as we revel and/or suffer in the heat and humidity of another southern summer, I invite you to reflect with me on the dog days of summer, baseball and life. What can baseball teach us about surviving those days of summer – of life when it is hard to get through another day?

Before we get to the dog days, listen to the words Giamatti wrote to end his essay; imagine they refer to life and not only baseball. “It breaks my heart because it was meant to...Of course there are those who learn after the first few times. They grow out of sports. And there are others who were born with the wisdom that nothing lasts. These are the truly tough among us, the ones who can live without illusion, or without even the hope of illusion. I am not that grown up or up-to-date. I am a simpler creature, tied to more primitive patterns and cycles. I need to think something lasts forever, and it might as well be that state of being that is a game; it might as well be that, in a green field, in the sun.”

I never met Bart Giamatti but when I read this essay and other essays he wrote about the spiritual nature of baseball, I knew I had found a soul mate. Someone who saw the poetry of life on a diamond made of dirt and grass, someone who looked at the canvass of baseball and saw life’s colors and artistry more clearly.

I fell in love with baseball during my eighth summer in 1965. Every day I would close the door to my room, turn on the radio and listen to Russ Hodges and Lon Simmons describe in deep, rich, baritone voices each pitch and swing of every San Francisco Giants baseball game. I would put on my official Giants plastic batting helmet, pretend I was Willie Mays, the Most Valuable Player that year, and swing at every pitch that flew through my radio. When the Giants were in the field I would put on my glove and I would run after every fly ball and dive for every ground ball.

I did not realize it at the time but I have come to know that my baseball stadium bedroom became a sanctuary for me from the reality of my seven year old life. In the summer of 1965 my mother and father were fighting with increasing frequency and in September, as Willie Mays hit his 50th home run and the Giants fought the hated Los Angeles Dodgers for first place, my mom and dad divorced. My mother, sister and I moved from our home, and I was not to have my own room –or private baseball stadium - again until I was 18.

My first year in seminary I received an assignment to write my spiritual autobiography. We were asked to reflect on where and when spirituality, religion and/or God came into our lives. Organized religion and God were not really part of my childhood but in writing my autobiography I discovered that, if one definition for God is something that we turn to for comfort or solace, baseball, Willie Mays, my baseball glove and bat, were my first Gods. When I was 7 years old I would begin each day of the baseball season by reading the most sacred scripture I knew – the box scores and standings. A spiritual practice I continue to this day.

I cannot remember the first time I read about the dog days of summer. I imagine it was in a sport’s writer’s article; probably the Giants’ beat writer in the San Francisco Examiner, the newspaper that I sold every afternoon after school and the newspaper where “Casey at the Bat” was first printed in 1888. The dog days of summer in baseball refer to those summer days when the sun is scorching hot, the humidity is high and the dreams and hopes of spring have been replaced by the realities of baseball life. By July and August teams who had hoped that this would be their year, find them selves in last place and know they will have to wait until, at least, next year to win it all.

For example, the Kansas City Royals woke up this morning, looked at the sacred standings and saw that they were 35 games out of first place. Our own Durham Bulls are in second place but have no chance of making the playoffs this year. It will be a long summer for teams such as the Royals, Devil Rays, the Pittsburgh Pirates, and sadly once again, the Chicago Cubs.

Most of us today have little sympathy for millionaire ballplayers in the major leagues who suffer through the long hot summer in last place. In the old days of baseball – before air conditioning, chartered plane rides, night games, cotton uniforms and multi-year, multi-million dollar contracts – the dog days of summer meant playing in stifling hot conditions, in wool uniforms and taking long train rides to the next town. Today conditions are much better but playing day after day in hundred degree weather is not all that easy. Surviving the dog days of summer is still one of the supreme tests a team must pass if they are to win a championship.

Growing up in San Francisco, where the average temperature in July and August rarely reaches into the 70s, the realities of the dog days of summer were hard for me to grasp. Now that I have lived in the south for five years, and I have suffered many days including this year, where the heat index reaches triple digits, I have a new appreciation for what I heard about the dog days all these years.

When I was researching this sermon I thought I should find out where the term “dog days” actually originated. To my surprise and regret, I did not find “the dog days of summer” in the Baseball Dictionary. I found “dog it” – to not give your best; “dog meat” – a term for a utility player and “dog robber” – a derogatory name for an umpire, but no dog days. It turns out that the “dog days of summer” is not a cute term coined by a grizzled sports writer but, as with most terms that become part of our every day lexicon, its origins can be traced to ancient times.

The dog days of summer were named by people living along the Mediterranean coast long, long ago. The “dog days” were the twenty days before and the twenty days after Sirius – the “dog star” – was in conjunction with the sun. The ancients believed that the heat from Sirius added to the heat of the sun creating the hottest, most uncomfortable and most disease ridden days of the year. For the record, this year the “official” dog days were from July 3 though August 11.

We know what the dog days are in fact and we know what they are in baseball – what might they be in life? When do we realize that things in our lives are not turning out the way we hoped? What are those days when we need to find a way to get through the heat, the humidity, the dreariness and maybe even boredom of life to get to the beginning of another season?

Here is a short list of some of the dog days we face in life.

The relationship, partnership or marriage that began with high hopes, magic and love starts to sour, and the person we fell in love with is not who we thought he or she was; or maybe they are but a committed long term relationship is not what we thought it was going to be. The job we thought we would have and love until the day we retire becomes a struggle to show up at every day. The body that once was trim and fit and took such good care of us, looks different when we stare in the mirror, and begins to betray us with increasing aches and pains every day. The teenager that once laughed and cooed in our arms, who made Valentine’s from shoeboxes that promised eternal love, starts to slam doors in our face and calls us names that we have not heard since – well since we called our parents the same names. Or the people we have loved in our life, who we counted on for comfort, for friendship, for guidance move away or die and our world feels lonelier and lonelier every day.

The list of events and seasons in our life when times are tough, when things are not going the way we dreamed, the way we hoped or expected is endless.

The hot, sticky days of summer are not the same as those bright days of spring when flowers burst with color and possibilities live in every garden we see, and most people, we meet. They are not the same as the cool days of fall when leaves show off in all their golden glory before they disappear and while our pace slows and we reminisce and fondly remember the days of old. The hot, sticky summer days are not even as hopeful as the cold, dark days of winter when death surrounds us but beauty comes in a blanket of freshly-fallen snow or the blossoms of a Bradford Pear tree and we *know* that rebirth and renewal is only one or two calendar pages away.

The dog days of summer are not a time for new beginnings, for bright eyes and big dreams. The dog days – both in baseball and in life – are for surviving, making it to that day when cool breezes and new perspectives can come once again.

I imagine all of us, if we look hard enough, can find the dog days somewhere in our life today. For some of us, the dog days are not a baseball metaphor this preacher is invoking, they are hard, painful, sometimes unbearable days when we wake up and feel like we cannot go on. We heard about some of

these days when we shared joys and concerns this morning. Some of us choose to suffer through our dog days silently.

Surviving those days, those weeks, those months in our lives when we feel like we are in last place and will never get out; those times when life seems too hot, too hard, too much to take, is one of the main reasons people turn to religion, to religious communities, to each other, to God and sometimes, maybe even to baseball.

I offer this morning four lessons baseball teaches us for getting through the hard times, the dog days of our lives. If they can work for the Chicago Cubs and the Kansas City Royals, they can work for us too.

First we need to step up to the plate, or the fastballs and curveballs of life, and keep swinging. Baseball players and fans know that the best hitter of all time, Ty Cobb, got a hit only 3 ½ times out of 10 tries. During the dog days our batting averages probably won't be so high. Sometimes the best we can do, when life is hard and we are not sure if we can take one more day, is to simply wake up and just make it through the day. We take our best swings knowing that in time the hits will fall again, in time the breaks will even out and things won't be so bad. The religious language for stepping up to the plate and taking our cuts might be "this too shall pass". As long as we show up and keep swinging our chances for hits, and for getting through the slumps of life improve dramatically.

The second lesson baseball teaches might seem at odds with the first one— take a day off every now and then. A good baseball manager gives his players a day off when they are in a slump or when the heat and strain of the dog days of summer start to take their toll. Most of us are not Lou Gehrig or Cal Ripken, two players who played over 2,000 consecutive games without taking a day off. Usually when life gets rough or we get in a rut, taking a day off from working, from grieving, from worrying us is the best medicine we will find. Finding something fun to do to escape – if only for a day – our worries and troubles refreshes us and reminds us there is more to life than the dog days. Clergy might call this practicing the Sabbath, John Tamargo, the manager of the Bulls, calls it taking a player's name off the lineup card.

The third lesson baseball teaches us is to trust our teammates. Baseball – like life – is a game that we play as individuals but that we win as a team. For six months a year a baseball team must count on the community and the encouragement of others. Successful teams talk about having great chemistry; that players can count on each other – especially during the tough times that often happen in the summer. Even when players fight with each other – as players are more prone to do during the dog days – the good teams have a way of using the conflict to help draw them closer.

The religious analogy for using our teammates should be easy to spot – it is called having and participating in a religious community, a congregation or fellowship. When times get tough we need to reach out to each other, to ask for help and not go to the end of the bench to sit alone. The people in strong religious communities – just like those on strong baseball teams – count on each other, encourage each other and cheer each other – especially when someone in the congregation, someone on the team, is down. We may not yell encouragement to each other from our seats in the sanctuary like I did from third base on my high school baseball team, but we must find ways to let others know that we are on their side, that we know they can make it.

The last lesson baseball teaches us is probably my favorite. Baseball always reminds us to cultivate hope and faith. Wait 'til next year is not simply a phrase that helps get players and fans through the dog days of summer, it is an attitude, a philosophy of life, a religious and spiritual creed. When life gets us down – whether we are the lowly Royals or someone who is sick and tired of life – our best chance at coming out of the dog days is to remember that there is almost always another season, another chance to play better, to love better and live better.

I suppose it is no accident that the two baseball teams of choice for many Unitarian Universalists I know are the Chicago Cubs and the Boston Red Sox. The Cubs have not won the World Series since 1908 and until 2004, the Red Sox had not won since 1918. These two teams – and their fans – are perfect symbols for an optimistic religion like ours that believes that tomorrow we can be better people than we are today, that love and hope conquer hate and fear and that life - or God - in all its glorious forms, is full of possibility and promise of beauty, wonder and surprise greater than we can ever imagine. Cultivating the faith that comes with the hope of waiting until next year is a tonic for almost all the dog days of our lives.

It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. Baseball. Life. It happens time and time again, day after day, summer after summer, year after year. Sometimes we strike out. Sometimes we get hit by a pitch. Sometimes we hit a home run. Sometimes, the best we can do is to simply show up and play the game.

May it be so. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

I offer "A Baseball Benediction" from my colleague Roger Cowan, a diehard Boston Red Sox fan:

May we all be free from error
and stay within life's "basepaths"

May we not strike out at others
nor balk at what is set before us.

May our Unitarian vision be enlarged with the words of a Buddhist ordering a hot dog at Fenway Park.
"He said make me one with everything."

And may, at last, we all be safe at home.