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Liturgies of the Body: The Jump Shot and Spiritual Practice

by Howard Schaap

Add a steeple, and you'd have an old-school Protestant meeting house: a long split-level white building with clapboard walls and evenly spaced rectangular windows. More to the point, my body yearns for it like a house of worship. My arms and legs, my gastrocs and triceps, and all the fingers of my hands are glad to go up to this house of the Lord, to ascend its steps to the covered landing, to pass through the small foyer and broom closet, and to enter the one long room of sanctuary, where sunlight slants in through the windows. The long narrow slats of the wood floor, which have been pieced together by artisans and waxed shiny by the attendant care of some sexton, lead me forward to the front wall, stripped bare but for a wooden and iron centerpiece. No, not a cross. A rounded wooden backboard, an iron ring. A basketball hoop.



I've been marooned on an island in the Pacific Northwest as part of a ten-day writing residency. And now I've fled the people, the constant talk of books and ideas, the lectures and readings that amounted to what a colleague called "soul excavation." I've escaped to this known space, a basketball court. This retreat might seem juvenile, like flipping from Bobby Fischer to the Dream Team, but for me it feels like the return to some long-lapsed idolatry.

I have come to this small island gym to do a specific workout, the same workout I began doing religiously more than twenty years earlier. At game speed, I take two hundred shots, rebounding all misses immediately and converting them as layups—making them right, so to speak—in around half an hour. My aim is repetition toward perfection: two hundred takes, two hundred makes. But now, at age thirty-eight, I am embarrassed lest anyone see. Springsteen’s “Glory Days” plays in my head.

By my fifth set of ten shots, right-handed one-dribble pull-ups, my body is lost in the old rhythms, but my mind is still aware of the open door behind me. I’m self-conscious of these body rituals in what I’ve recognized as a Protestant space. Out through the chain-link that covers the windows, across the soggy grass field, I can also see the island’s makeshift lecture hall, where I imagine the minds of others still going strong. My body wants to stay here in the liturgies it knows, yet my mind insists on feeling guilty. The next shot is short. The ball caroms across the gym, and I have to chase it down.

I grew up in the rural Minnesota version of *Hoosiers*: a country boy and his basketball, shooting turnaround jump shots at dusk from the chickweed patches that grew in between the ruts of the gravel drive in front of the garage. The summer before my junior year of high school, our coach changed the shape of those nightly shootarounds when he recruited a dark-haired huckster from somewhere up north to direct our annual basketball camp. I remember that he had powerful, hairy legs, that he taught us to shoot out of a chair, and that he wanted to patent his chair-shooting technique so nobody else could use it. The jump shot is all physics and angles, he told us. The angles begin with a properly bent wrist and elbow but also occur naturally at your waist and knees when you sit in a chair. A jump shot came from unleashing all this potential energy, as

you stood up from the chair and shot. When done in one fluid motion, the ball lofted up in an arc that opened the hoop from above and ended with the softest of swishes in the nylon net.

That summer, twilit night after twilit night, as I sat before my rusted hoop on a folding chair in the middle of a patch of chickweed and tried out chair shooting, first from two feet, then eight, then fifteen, then nineteen-point-nine, a mysterious and powerful thing happened. Sometime between the second and third week, something clicked. I was being transformed into a jump shooter with surprising range and accuracy.

Then at a basketball camp the following summer on a Christian college campus in northwest Iowa, I got just what I needed to go with the idea and practice of a jump shot: a vision. My teammates and I lived in dorm rooms for the week, eating and fellowshiping together, which meant, among other things, chewing Copenhagen and Skoal during breaks and gossiping about one of the good-looking kitchen staff. Each day after meals, while our food settled before drills, we sat in rows on the bleachers for devotions and lectures, hundreds of us, a fearsome audience of adolescent males.

The lecture that changed me was delivered by a young, up-and-coming coach with feathered blonde hair.

“You’ve probably heard the phrase, ‘practice makes perfect,’” he began. He paced back and forth in front of us, looking back at the other adults and laughing at inside jokes—“Isn’t that right, Craig?” But then he continued, with just enough chutzpah to keep our attention, just enough litheness in his step for us to believe that he might actually know what he was talking about: “Well, I’m here today to tell you that that’s not right. Practice *doesn’t* make perfect. I’m here to tell you today that you can practice all you want—you can practice till the cows come home; you can skip breakfast, lunch, and dinner to practice—but if you’re practicing wrong, you

won't get any better. Or you'll get better but only to a point. There will always be someone who practices more, so what will set you apart?"

By this time, I had realized that my dreams of playing in the NBA were naive, but I still believed that I could play college ball. I still had to believe that I could improve myself, lift myself into glory and improbable realms of achievement. But it was late in a week in which I had proved myself supremely average. And so I was primed for an altar call, ready to lay down mind and body together as one living sacrifice, especially if the altar was a basketball court.

"No, it's not practice that makes perfect. It's *perfect* practice that makes perfect. There are some here who would challenge me on that; for them that sounds a little cocky—'perfect practice makes perfect.' That's OK. I've never been accused of being under-confident."

I knew Mr. Blonde Feather Hair had one trick left. This was a Bible camp, after all, and he had yet to play the Jesus card. "Of course, we can't really attain perfection this side of heaven, no matter how much any of us practice, only one guy ever did that. But why not aim high?"

There it was. I could do this—practice smarter, harder—but I'd needed a whiff of Jesus, and I'd gotten it, however vague. That the whiff was more Ben Franklin's checklist toward perfection or Ralph Waldo Emerson's self-reliance than Jesus's take-up-your-cross-and-follow-me was lost on me then.

Plus, the lesson moved on to practical application.

Right on cue and mic'd up, the star player of the college walked out onto the court carrying a basketball and a steel folding chair. This presentation was about to hit us where we were most susceptible: our bodies. We could feel our bodies growing into themselves, could still believe in their potential as they sucked up the atomic energy of the universe, and here was body at its peak. The response on the bleachers was visceral, a shifting, a rumble. He looked to be

about six-feet-nothing with short dark hair and solid good looks. He was in shape but not buff. In street clothes you would never know he was an NAIA All-American.

The routine—named after Indiana basketball legend Steve Alford, a self-made college player from Nowhere, Indiana, who never really made it in the pros—went like this: Take your ball and set it on the chair at the spot you want to shoot, say the left-wing three-point line. Then position yourself underneath the hoop, where you would start your cut to get away from your defender in a game situation. Now take two hard steps in the opposite direction to set up this imaginary defender before sprinting back out to the three-point line, picking up the ball from the chair, and launching a shot. Follow your shot back to the hoop to get the rebound—pray it hasn't caromed across the court—and put it in if you miss. Then run the ball back out to the chair before sprinting back underneath the hoop where you'll start the process again—ten times for the novice, twenty for the semi-serious, and fifty for the all-American. Take ten free throws after each full-speed set to catch your breath, and then repeat this in ten to twenty different spots on the floor until you had completed your desired number of shots.

Throughout this exercise, the all-American narrated what he was doing, breathing heavily. Close range jumpers, right- and left-wing pull-ups, three-pointers curling in, three-pointers fading out, jump shots off various crossovers—between the legs, behind the back, the “killer-crossover”—awkward angled banks, NBA-range and beyond threes—as he made shot after shot, the whispers in the room grew. The possibility of it—that we could become what he was—grew loud in our minds. “And—when I shoot free throws—in between—I run a sprint—for every first or second free throw I miss,” he huffed, “to train myself for game situations.”

Later, we met in some other kids' room for a chew. One of the kids said about the lunch girl, “Man, I'd like her to wrap those long legs around me all night long.” But the girl wasn't my

type, and I'd caught a vision of something else. A religious life, I knew, was rooted in regular attendance to the word and prayer, but that life was flattened by mere practice, by rote recitation or going through the motions. However, if you set a more rigorous path for yourself, if you bent mind and body to the task, well, that might translate into upward, faithful living. That night, I went back to my room and talked this over with Marlon, a kid I hadn't known at the beginning of the week but with whom I hit it off almost impossibly well. We talked about how we'd like to bring authentic, heartfelt religion to our school communities that otherwise seemed a nearly impossible mix of cynicism, emptiness, and complacency. We discussed how we were meant for something better, higher, truer, and we believed we might get there through what we were coming to understand as the key to life: single-mindedness.

After the camp, I was devoted to the Steve Alford drill. I did it all that summer and into the fall: on the gravel court that spit my ball across our yard every twelfth shot; in the employee gym at two o'clock in the morning after the night shift I worked at a plastics factory; and during my school lunch break instead of horsing around with other students. I didn't care that I went to class sweaty or that I was missing out on relationships I saw ending at graduation, especially when I began making shots without thinking, shots I shouldn't have made, shots that came somewhere from my subconscious. My body was coming to know the rhythms of the jump shot so well that my mind didn't need to pay attention. Strict adherence to the Steve Alford drill transformed me from a post player shooting five-footers from the chickweed to a lanky small forward launching twenty-footers from the depths of the right wing, where my gravel drive fell away toward the empty cattle yards. It brought college basketball within my range, and it felt like a religious breakthrough.

In college, it took me three years to break into the starting lineup of a Division III school, but during one of these out-of-body flow states, I once scored seventeen points (of course I remember the exact number)—taking off-balance, deep-in-the-corner, impractical-to-shoot shots that went in anyway. It’s all I can do to stop from describing each of them in explicit detail, as they are still alive in my memory—William Wordsworth’s “spots of time” without the daffodils.

Then, in the fall of my senior year of college, I quit basketball to attend a term in England, where, after leech-gathering in Wordsworth’s Lake District and hiking in Emily Brontë’s moors and traipsing Shakespeare’s Stratford and tubing everyone’s London, we made a tour up through W. B. Yeats’s Ireland. We visited Coole Park, and I saw a swan disappear into the mist and heard the roaring waters outside of Thoor Ballylee, a stone tower with cramped passageways that still emanated Yeats in all of his passion and mysticism. Boarding the bus then, I relived the out-of-body jump shots from the past year, felt them in slow motion, felt the aura of the gymnasium, the ball released from my hand, the interminable time that the ball hung in the air as I waited for it to come down, which it did, silently, perfectly, almost without rippling the net. The memory seemed mystical. Perhaps I was homesick, yearning for a place and dimensions that were familiar; my body was missing the liturgy of the season, yearning for the touch and rituals it knew were missing. Or perhaps I was overcome with Yeats, poems like “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” in which Aengus, the speaker and traditionally an Irish god of youth, beauty, and poetry, “hooked a berry to a thread” and “caught a little silver trout” that transforms when he’s not looking into a “glimmering girl.” She calls his name but then runs and fades mysteriously “through the brightening air,” and Aengus spends his life in search of her. “I will find out where she has gone,” he promises,

And kiss her lips and take her hands;

And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

I knew I'd lost something I'd never find again—the essence of youth, the deep communing with and through the body that touches something beyond one's actual abilities. I heard that loss echo in “The Song of Wandering Aengus.”

It's the same wood elf spell cast when I watch Wardell Stephen Curry II play basketball for the Golden State Warriors.

Still, even if the “glimmering girl” ideal is irrevocably lost, given a spot of time, I'd head right now to a private gym and take up the Steve Alford drill. It looks crazier than ever. Once, while I was doing the workout in our high school gym, a teaching colleague surprised me, asking “Are you winning?” I stopped, held the ball against my hip, almost behind my back like I'd been caught shoplifting, and tried to explain.

“This is an old—workout—I do—for exercise.”

But I had no response for the underlying question that my colleague seemed to be asking—“Holding onto our youth, are we?” Without the *telos* of making some team or achieving some glory, the Steve Alford drill makes no sense, thus suggesting that its “perfect practice makes perfect” mantra that I'm still reverencing has become for me a vain half measure against aging.

So I resist the impulse to play alone. Instead, I play pickup games at the local gym. Many times it's not good basketball—it's slow, with lazy fouls to prevent the other team from scoring.

Then again, we know each other's foibles. Sit on Andrew Fleischman's left hand. Don't let Kevin Thiessen get to his baseline turnaround. Keep Mark Vander Pol off the boards. It's no church; if the regulars don't know you, they won't trust you, and you won't get the ball.

But now, thousands of miles away from this home court and out of sorts on Whidbey Island, an empty gym is a welcome comfort. I need the workout to tax my body in order to balance out all this heavy thought. It will also sharpen my game—wait, is that what I'm doing? Still considering competitive benefits to improve myself? Or am I hoping that the physical routine will bring to the surface what I really think, will help me to reorient a recently excavated soul? Am I leaving the old dualism behind or turning back for one more glimpse?

How does one live a bodily sacrifice? Paul might be the one who instructs us *to* do it, but Old Testament characters show us *how* to do it, sometimes by getting it wrong before they get it right. When David brought the ark of the Lord up to Jerusalem the first time, he celebrated with all his might, but the Lord was angry at his arrogance and killed one of his men (2 Sam. 6:5–7). On his second attempt, famously stripped down to nothing but an ephod, David again danced with “all his might” and was looked at with contempt by his wife (6:14–16 NRSV). I'm interested in the phrase “all his might,” that one might do something with all one's might but anger the Lord by the manner of one's might or embarrass oneself in the eyes of others but please the Lord. It's clear that to the Lord such embarrassment is preferable.

David's dancing is also a prophetic moment through which we can look down the years, through Solomon's temple and the rebuilt temple to the woman at the well, whom Jesus frees to worship in spirit and truth, down to the wrecked and rebuilt temple of Jesus's own body, to, finally, our own bodies made temples of the Holy Spirit. You can trace the move in these passages from buildings to bodies. These bodies of ours can and should be vessels of worship, in

spirit and truth. Joined together, they are part of the Body and yet each body dances with all its might, a living sacrifice.

What is it I'm searching for through the Steve Alford drill at age thirty-eight? Is it the old household gods, the mantra of "perfect practice makes perfect"? Or freed from those things, am I able to worship in a liturgy of the body, offering up the work of my hands, even something as foolish as a well-crafted jump shot?

Perhaps it depends on the manner, on the might, on the conscious and unconscious mind, on the spirit and truth. But it's the body that's the temple when these things coalesce into moments of failure or excellence, into embarrassment or transcendence, into offering.