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# From Team Hoyt to I'll Push You: An Embodied Prophetic Message

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*Abstract*

This paper explores stories of people with disabilities in sport settings that do more than inspire, they indicate how all people respond to the need and desire for both play and challenge. In 2014, Justin Skeesuck, with no use of his arms or legs, completed the 500-mile Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, pushed by his best friend Patrick Gray. This duo followed the 40-year-old legacy of Dick and Rick Hoyt, who have together completed over 1000 endurance races with Dick pushing and pulling his quadriplegic son Rick. Understanding play as fundamental to human life regardless of disability, these examples take the form of sport and extreme physical challenge. Through their fully embodied participation, Justin and Rick display fundamental anthropological and theological characteristics. Their disability sport stories illustrate not just their own personal determination to overcome obstacles, but a prophetic witness to the true shape of human courage, self-sacrifice, and love, so easily missed due to the societal bias against those with disabilities.

KEYWORDS: Team Hoyt, play, disability, “I’ll Push You”, prophetic message

Play is described as fundamental to human life and culture (Huizinga, 1950; Berger, 1990), and games and sport as derivatives of play (Suits, 1978; Johnston, 1982; Ellis, 2014). Humans are delightfully curved toward play in its many forms, and like any human quality, each of us is drawn by particularities formed by natural interest and our environment. For many, play takes the form of sport, each with its own customs, rituals, rules and requirements. Sport participation almost always involves vigorous embodied challenge in a contest with opponents. Sometimes, however, the challenge is more about completion of a difficult task, as is often the case with a person’s first

marathon. Given the physical demands, it is not surprising that we question whether this inherent human desire toward play and sport somehow, maybe even compassionately, eludes a person with a significantly limiting disability. To dream of such involvement seems at minimum out of reach and certainly irrelevant to daily life. We might even wonder if playful retreats, particularly those of rigorous challenge, may represent a poor investment of attention for people with severe physical limitations, away from the necessary focus on simple daily tasks and survival. We might assume the voluntary struggle and strenuous achievement of sport belongs to the swift and strong. But we would be wrong.

Disability, in whatever form, often means exclusion. Perhaps this applies to an even greater extent in the world of play and sport. Writer Meira Weiss (2007, p. 107), observes that in our age, '… the glorification of the physical body has had implications for the devaluation of the disabled body,'—and in turn, the marginalization and devaluation of people with physical disabilities in sports and wider society. If play is inherent in human nature, and if for many of us the vigorous, testing form of play that the Greeks call *agon*, (where we get the word, agony), is central to human culture, then why should this desire only fall on those who can participate in conventional ways? Thankfully, certain stories challenge this misguided assumption and serve to reshape our most fundamental understanding of reality as we encounter what it means to be human, the centerpiece of God's creation. Two such stories are those of Team Hoyt and "I'll push you".

**I'll Push You**

When asked why he chose to traverse the pilgrimage known as El Camino de Santiago, Justin Skeesuck explained how the journey "called" him. For various reasons, each year thousands of people set out to complete the 500-mile trek through a pass in Pyrenees mountains beginning in southern France and ending in a small village in Northwest Spain. As he joined the pilgrimage in

2014, Skeesuck's motivation was different. Due to a progressive neurological disease, Justin began losing feeling and function in his legs at around the age of sixteen. Over the next two decades, he lost use of his legs, followed by much of the function of his arms and shoulders, eventually forcing him out of his job as a graphic designer and into an electric wheelchair. As such, Justin's audacious desire to complete 'The Camino' required a partner who came in the form of his childhood best friend, Patrick Gray. Justin and Patrick were born only hours apart in the same hospital. They grew up going to the same schools, with families that share similar values and faith. Best men at each other's wedding, the two remained friends into adulthood and today their children play together. When Justin shared his Camino dream, Patrick had a simple response. "I'll push you."

The two friends raised money, both for the trip and the custom wheelchair needed for the rocky terrain. As anticipated, the journey had many hardships. On just their second day they were confronted by a 4000 foot, 10-mile uphill climb. Old friends and new acquaintances made on the trail provided help along the way, because getting Justin up steep grades often required pulling with a harness from the front and pushing from the back. Sometimes the path was too steep, meaning Justin (weighing roughly 200 lbs.) had to be carried a few yards at a time. All along the nearly six week pilgrimage, Patrick was arduously pushing, pulling, or carrying his best friend; and perhaps more difficultly, Justin was letting him. The small film crew that accompanied Justin and Patrick is now editing the footage into a documentary to be released in June, 2017 titled, after Patrick's prophetic words, "I'll Push You." A website by the same name hosts video clips from the adventure and Justin and Patrick attend speaking engagements across the world recounting the details on their story, including tales of long trudges through ankle deep mud and needing strangers to help weld a broken aluminum wheel. The speaking tour allows both of them to talk openly about their Christian faith and the lessons of friendship, tenacity, and courage. When they recount their story, few dry eyes are

left in the room.

**Team Hoyt**

The duo of Justin and Patrick closely follow the path carved by son-and-father tandem Rick and Dick Hoyt. This year marks the 40th anniversary of Team Hoyt, a story that started in 1977 when Rick asked his father if they could take-part in a five-mile fund-raising run for a lacrosse player who had been paralyzed in an accident. Reluctantly at first, due to his lack of physical conditioning, Dick Hoyt agreed and pushed his son the five miles, finishing the race and coming in second-to-last. Remember that inauspicious beginning, Dick comments that they 'have not stopped running since, and we've never finished last.' That evening after the five-mile race, Rick sparked something deep inside his father's heart, by typing on his computer—what the Hoyt family calls the 'Hope Machine'— 'Dad, when I'm running, it feels like I'm not even handicapped'. This was a "defining moment", given that at his birth, Rick Hoyt's parents had been advised by doctors to institutionalize their son, which was the norm during that era. Rick Hoyt was born a spastic quadriplegic in 1962 and was non-verbal, although he does not have an intellectual disability, which is demonstrated by the fact that he graduated from Boston University in 1993 with a degree in Special Education.

In completing a full Ironman event, Dick Hoyt swims 2.4 miles pulling Rick in an inflatable boat with an adapted parachute harness and bungee cord, he then cycles 112 miles with Rick sitting on the front of the cycle in an adapted chair, and finally, Dick runs 26.2 miles, pushing him in a custom-made wheelchair. They have competed in over one-thousand endurance sport events, most recently the 2014 Boston Marathon, which is their favorite race. To date, Team Hoyt's impressive list of accomplishments include 65 marathons, with a personal best time of 2 hours, 40 minutes and 47 seconds, 81 half-marathons, 234 triathlons (6 Ironman and 7 half-Ironman distances), and a 1992 cycle and run across America totaling 3,735 miles from the west to the east coast.

The story of Team Hoyt is documented in two books (Hoyt and Yaeger, 2010; Nall, 2002) and an official DVD (World Triathlon Corporation, 2006), but was more widely publicized in America through an article by Rick Reilly in the periodical *Sports Illustrated* on Father's Day, 2005, and through various national television interviews on ESPN, CBS and NBC networks. This father-son team, however, became a global phenomenon through a range of short videos available on You-Tube and God-Tube, viewed by over sixteen-million people to date. Many, including the authors of this paper, have used the official Team Hoyt DVD and online videos when teaching university classes on disability sport and when giving talks in churches, colleges and Christian ministry contexts. Each time we have witnessed the profound impact on students and others—silence, tears, and wrestling with difficult questions surrounding faith, disability and their own fragility.

**Celebrating Sameness**

The stories of both Team Hoyt and I'll Push You are almost always depicted as inspirational. They depict a will to overcome a disability and the heroic aspects of friendship and self-sacrifice. Such an interpretation has merit. But heroic identities ascribed to persons with disabilities and those who accompany them can carry a mixed message (Meyer & Watson, 2014), often advancing an unintentional barrier between persons with diagnosed disabilities and everyone else. Thomas Reynolds (2012) describes this as the "Cult of Normalcy". In essence, society calculates the value of bodily appearance and function and makes an intuitive us/them distinction. Reynolds warns that the desire to accommodate and include "perpetuates inside-outside dualism that ironically retains a condescending air of pity" (p. 29). Further, in recognizing the general desire to create different categories for people with disabilities in sport, Watts (2014) warns that "athletes with a disability, and people with disabilities in general, cry out for acceptance as persons first, and as a person with a disability second" (p. 65). Stories like Team Hoyt and I'll Push, we argue, can be viewed heroically

but perhaps a better path would be to begin by celebrating our shared nature.

Bolstered by a theological understanding of play and sport, these stories are opportunities to explore "sameness" rather than difference, featuring our shared need and capacity for embodied play and the role of play, sport, and physical challenge in the human life. Through the I'll Push You pilgrimage and the Team Hoyt races, both tandems voluntarily entered into an experience, putting themselves on the difficult end of significant obstacles, for no other reason than the joy of surpassing them. This is play and intentional bi-directional love. This is human.

In his classic treatise on play entitled *Homo Ludens* (man the player), Huizinga (1950) describe how play operates by its own rules and on its own time. For all humans, play and sport share the quality of finding joy in a make-believe world. When we enter this space, we recognize that the obstacles, rules, and completion points of a particular sport or challenge are arbitrarily constructed. This is not unlike the game of hide and seek, or indeed the parameters of a pilgrimage or a triathlon. The participants voluntarily adhere to the distances as a means of joining the game, joining the human race in our collective desire to play and compete, whether against ourselves, or others. For some, this call is so strong that we're compelled to engage in a fully embodied way, regardless of what we can and cannot do at a given time.

Justin and Rick, disabilities and all, joined the game as a voluntary act. Neither was interested in a cameo appearance or an accommodating alternative; they were serious. Taking it a step further, poet and naturalist Dianne Ackerman (1999) describes the notion of *deep play* in a book by the same name, as visible, intense and transcendent. She notes some activities are prone to deep play, mostly those that require risk-taking, and especially "those that take place in relatively remote, silent, and floaty environments, such as scuba diving, parachuting, hang gliding, mountain climbing" (p. 12).

Justin's pilgrimage and Rick's endurance races are perfect environments for deep play. When both made the decision to participate, they were simply being human, called in a fully embodied way by the joy of play and sport, which is fundamentally "normal".

Neither Justin Skeesuck nor Rick Hoyt would have been blamed or criticized for hearing or thinking about such adventures and dismissing them outright. Why take on such struggle voluntarily? Knowing his limitations, Justin could have accommodated his interest in travel by 'reading about' the Camino de Santiago, or having friends complete the journey sending back pictures and blogs. He could have traveled by car to each of the villages along the way to meet his friend Patrick as he walked the trail. Or with today's technology, a GoPro or a guided video tour by a drone would have provided him with a unique perspective. Comparatively, Rick Hoyt could have watched his father Dick run marathons and complete triathlons while holding a stopwatch and keeping statistics. Rick could have researched routes, offered training tips to his father, and posed with him for finish line pictures. Justin and Rick had alternatives, accommodations, methods of inclusion, but of course, none of this would suffice. They needed to go the distance—bodily.

Sports and physical activities are often broken down into dualistic forms. Phrases such as "golf is ninety percent mental" typify the tendency to think of human activity as pieces of a puzzle that do not overlap. This compartmentalized view limits our capacity to understand the interconnectedness of human life and undervalues the beauty of the whole. Theologian John Cooper (1999) describes humankind as having "psychosomatic integrity." The humans God created were whole creatures. Human bodies were formed, artfully and purposefully, as an essential aspect of God's most prized creation, the one He called, "very good." This is true in moments of our greatest strength and our greatest vulnerability. When reflecting on the significance of our bodies for understanding what it means to be a member of the body of Christ, John Swinton (2015, p.229) states

that "*Human bodies are holy places* … the mark of the body of Christ is the diversity of the bodies within it. Unity is created and held together not through equality but via diversity-in-Christ. Bodies matter." Disabled bodies matter. For all the particular stuff we are made of, our uniquely human capacities all blended together—body, mind, and spirit—give our explicitly physical experiences more potential for beauty and richness and make each activity more enduring and purposeful.

At one point along their The Camino pilgrimage, the trail split into two paths - a meandering flat route and a rocky, treacherous downhill. From his chair, Justin was the decision maker. Though he knew one way was easier way for him and Patrick, he chose difficult path. Justin voluntarily took on a new challenge, the hardest of challenges, as an opportunity to overcome, as a chance for the joy of accomplishment, even risking failure. Every sports person understands this choice. The end being unknown is part of the drama and the allure. A person accepts the challenge by being willing to risk the sadness and disappointment of failure, just for the chance to taste the sweet joy of success. Comparatively, Rick Hoyt takes great pride in the finish position and time that he and his father post for each race. They don't simply try to complete distances and rack up miles, they work to achieve, to beat personal bests, to compete. Rick loves sports. His first expressed words through the Hope Machine were not the predictable "I love you mom" or "thanks dad", but "Go Bruins!" (the professional ice hockey team of his hometown Boston). These are words of a sports lover, a player, an athlete.

**Prophetic Role**

Though Justin Skeesuck and Rick Hoyt are simply being human in their activites like their able-bodied counter-parts, there's no question there are also marked differences. Onlookers on the Camino pilgrimage and fellow competitors in triathlons do turn their heads to see something remarkable. Just like for elite, marquee sport, or children creating their own games in the back yard,

it is not offensive for participants or onlookers to find inspiration or deep lessons within the drama. Those who embody weakness have profound lessons to teach us. According to Reynolds (2012, p.26), disability "plays a crucial, prophetic role in exposing the social pretensions of the "normal" and invites us to see our humanity as vulnerable gifts to be received by each other in relationships of mutual giving and receiving." Educationally and spiritually, these stories seem to open the doors of the heart, allowing for a deeper understanding of gospel themes, for example grace, which is the availability of God's redeeming love for humans who are totally depend upon it.

For the pushers and pullers, Dick Hoyt and Patrick Grey, perhaps we are awed by their sheer grit, toughness, determination, and willingness to find deep motivation in serving the other—to literally be the hands and feet of another, in playful union. In both men, we see the power of a very intentional love, in this case exhibited in and through disability. Yet though they supply greater amounts of sweat and toil in these endurance activities, both have suggested that they have gotten more from the experience than they gave. And though it may seem they bear the greatest burden, upon reflection most of us recognize the excruciating difficulty of vulnerability. At one point on the journey, an exhausted, tearful Justin Skeesuck weakly confessed, "It's really hard … to let somebody do this for you." (Skeesuck & Gray, 2016). Both Justin Skeesuck and Rick Hoyt were playful enough to join the journey, inviting helpers, and us, to join them.

After several years of successful races Rick Hoyt was asked if he could give one thing to his father, what would it be? He prophetically replied, "I'd push him." Rick and Dick Hoyt have left a legacy, inspiring others such as Justin Skeesuck and Patrick Gray, to respond to their natural inclinations to play, together.

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