Response to Joe Price’s essay

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I have a theological education, but my sophistication about sports in American life is exceedingly limited. And until I interviewed Joe Price for my public radio program, Speaking of Faith, it had never occurred to me to attempt to bring the two endeavors together. I should disclose that I grew up in Oklahoma, where football is closely associated with the meaning of life. I, however, chose the route of heresy; I did not Follow the Sooners. And though I am now living in Twins territory, I never really gave gentler sports like baseball a chance. With this essay I find Joe Price challenging me again to take baseball seriously as an aspect of human life with spiritual resonance, indeed infused with strange and powerful mystical possibilities.

But is it really valid to transpose the weighty biblical notion cursing and blessing onto what happens on a playing field?

I simply raise the question; Price brings us into territory upon which none of us is qualified to make absolute pronouncements. It is the territory of mystery that faith proclaims as real right alongside the necessity to posit particular, definable truths as best we can discern them. It can be argued that superstition and mystery are not at all the same thing, though it can certainly be argued as well that they may overlap. We see through a glass darkly, after all. As I read Price’s essay, I wasn’t brought to recall theological or scriptural images so much as phrases from culture that point to the possibility of the playful complicity of the Divine in what we glibly call “coincidence.” The late novelist Robertson Davies defined coincidence as “a cosmic sort of pun.” A friend of mine says, with a more theological spin, that coincidence is “God acting anonymously.”

Another recent guest on my program, a Lakota teacher named Basil Braveheart, opened my imagination about “ritual” in a way that helped me read Price’s musings on ritual more sympathetically. He says that the Spirits—the force of creation, the Mystery, mystical possibility—are all around us all the time, moving in the fabric of the world and human experience. In rituals, we create “containers” for Spirit to make itself known and felt and to make a more direct, if inexplicable and transitory, impact on us.

Still it remains a stretch for me to connect what happens in a baseball game with my training and religious sensibility about ritual and mystery, cursing and blessing. But I’ll let one of my listeners from Virginia have the last word in this essay—someone who heard Joe Price talk about baseball as a cosmic endeavor and who attests to this reality in his own life.

Baseball - God's Game

As I listened to the program "In Praise of Play," I was reassured that I was/am not as crazy as people would imagine me to be. I serve as an Associate Pastor in a local Baptist congregation and I am an avid baseball fan. Many times I have jokingly referred to baseball as my mistress, although my wife finds no humor whatsoever in it.
Since I was a child I have loved the game and in the stillness of a moment watching a game I feel the connection with God. The God I worship is the Creator God who rested on the seventh day. God also commands us to enjoy the Sabbath and baseball is a game of Sabbath. There is no time clock, no hurry to get to the end, only nine innings of pure Sabbath. Each pitch, each swing of the bat, each diving catch, each vendor yelling "Hot Dogss", a moment of rest from everything else. Deadlines are forgotten, projects put on hold… for a period of time nothing else matters but that we are watching baseball, God's game.

Also, for a moment in time we all are kids again. Our teams hat placed firmly on our head, cracker jacks in one hand and our worn tattered baseball glove on the other. We all think that today is the day that we will catch a foul ball, the ultimate souvenir. All that matters for a moment of time, for a sunny afternoon is the hope that we live out as we wait for the ball to be hit to us.

Baseball is God's game for God asks us to come to him in childlike faith, a faith that I think is much like the faith I have at the ballpark. Finally, baseball, like religion, calls us to remember the feats of those gone by and celebrate their lives. No sport has the richness of baseball in it's remembrance. There are tales of Babe, Teddy Ballgame, Joltin' Joe, Hammerin Hank, the Wizard of Oz, Jackie Robinson, Ty Cobb, etc., etc., etc. We recall in Christianity the stories and lives of those of yesteryear those who have played the game of life before us and their greatness. There was Abraham, David, Ruth, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, St. John of the Cross, Mother Theresa, etc. etc. etc. Lives that remind us that there is something bigger than ourselves calling us into relationship. God is a God who I know who loves baseball.
Response to Joe Price’s essay on sports, curses and superstition

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It hit me while standing 20 rows behind home plate at Wrigley Field last summer. Not a wayward foul ball, but the notion that cultural superstition is more than a token nod to the sports gods above. Sure, superstition in sports is more visible on a pitcher’s mound, or an end zone, or a goalie’s net, but its ripple effect often reaches into the stands, over the nose bleed sections, and into the homes of millions of sports fans, too.

At Wrigley that day, New York Yankees pitcher Roger Clemens just walked off the mound with his much-ballyhooed 300th victory being penciled into the books.

All eyes were on Chicago Cubs batter Eric Karros, who faced Yankees’ relief pitcher Juan Acevedo. Acevedo had to retire Karros to protect Clemens’ masterpiece shutout and Hall of Fame-sealing victory. In a nutshell, history was on the line.

Nearly 40,000 Cubs and Yankees fans waited for the windup and screamed for their desired outcome.

I stood up with the faithful and looked over to an elderly woman a few rows in front of me. She sported a Cubs cap, turned inside out and worn backward – yes, the infamous baseball “rally cap.”

Seconds later, Karros cracked the ball over the left field fence for a 3 to 1 Cubs lead. Clemens would have to wait for his 300th win.

As Karros circled the bases, the old lady ripped off her seemingly miraculous rally cap, kissed it, and put it back atop her head in normal fashion, smiling as she returned to her seat. Surely she believed her rally cap superstition saved the day. Or did she?

This, in a fan-friendly way, is just one example behind Joe Price’s "Conjuring Curses and Supplicating Spirits: Baseball’s Culture of Superstitions."

Did the old lady really believe she helped propel Karros’ ball into the stands? Probably not. But, as she and other believers will tell you, it didn’t hurt his chances. And so it goes, this shameless flirtation with superstition, ritual and curses in baseball and most every other sporting event. As Price points out, curses derive their power from an underlying culture of superstition, not from the notoriety of the performer. In other words, that old lady held just as much magic in her rally cap than a dugout full of Chicago Cubs players.

The difference, however, is that her job, her career -- her livelihood -- wasn’t on the line.

Maybe this explains why thousands of professional ball players go through ridiculously repetitive, yet comforting personal habits to ensure a winning performance.
Take, for example, Dennis Grossini, a 1970s Detroit Tigers farm team pitcher who performed the exact same routine on each pitching day for the first three months of a winning season, according to cultural anthropologist George Gmelch's landmark essay, “Baseball Magic.”

On each day, Grossini arose from bed at exactly 10 a.m. and went to the nearest restaurant for two glasses of iced tea and a tuna sandwich at 1 p.m. One hour before each game, he chewed a wad of Beech-Nut tobacco, and after each pitch during the game he touched the letters on his uniform and straightened his cap. He also replaced the pitcher’s resin bag next to the spot where it was the inning before, and after every inning he gave up a run, he washed his hands. Why? “You can’t really tell what’s most important so it all becomes important. I’d be afraid to change anything,” he replied.

Ah yes, fear, the primal motivator.

It is fear that provokes athletes to implement such illogical practices, just as it was fear that prompted Trobriand Islanders, according to fellow anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, to implement “magic” into their fishing. The Trobrianders feared fishing on the dangerous open sea (as opposed to fishing in the safer lagoon), so they used magical ritual to ensure safety and increase their catches. Did it help? Well, it couldn’t hurt, and they were probably too afraid to change their magical habits, similar to the Tigers’ Grossini.

Though some rituals are group oriented -- like wearing rally caps when looking for come-from-behind victories -- most rituals are quite personal and done in an unemotional manner, Gmelch determined, like how players apply pine tar to their bats to improve their grip or how they smear black paint under their eyes to reduce the sun’s glare.

Others believe sports players’ “rituals” are merely behavioral byproducts dictated on a daily diet of actions and rewards, similar to what behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner proved with a few grains of seed and pigeons.

Skinner could get his trained pigeons to do whatever he wanted by rewarding them with food.

He discovered that his pigeons clearly associated food with a specific action, and after a few seconds of waiting, his pigeons would recreate whatever action led to getting more food. In other words, his pigeons believed -- or at least behaved -- as if each specific action led to more food. And most ballplayers, whose careers are measured statistically in their actions, are no different.

Indiana University Northwest sociology professor Charles Gallmeier focuses in on this seemingly sports-related phenomenon by expanding its scope over the human condition.

Gallmeier, a dedicated sports fan(atic) who published "Hockey Magic: Strategies for Coping with Occupational Uncertainty" several years ago, explained that when rational explanations or practices don't seem to provide satisfactory answers in an uncertain life, human groups often resort to more supernatural strategies or explanations, such as magic, superstition, fate, good luck charms, etc.

“Baseball is a great example of how this works,” Gallmeier says. “As a rule, baseball players only seem to employ magical rituals, adopt taboos or honor superstitions when it comes to hitting the baseball, not when it comes to catching the baseball.”

For this reason, he says, most players only practice magic to help them with their hitting and not with their...
The commonality in all this is that the life of baseball players -- or sports athletes, or Trobriand Island fishermen, or hungry pigeons, or Sunday sermon believers for that matter -- is wrought with uncertainty and risk. Because of this, they, we -- us -- will use any practice, magical or mundane, to cope with the fear of striking out.
Response to Joe Price

Author: Mark G. Toulouse (---.di recpc.com)
Date: 09-01-04 16:20

Joe Price has offered an insightful and interesting analysis of the linkages between curses and superstitions in baseball. “Curses,” he notes, “derive their power from the underlying culture of superstition” that exists in baseball. While I am persuaded this is the case, I am also moved by Price’s essay to explore briefly the tension that exists between the character of baseball’s “religious” beliefs and baseball’s developing understanding of the curse as “a force of the demonic” or a “cosmic cause for failure.”

The religious nature of baseball’s character has developed alongside and in ways consistent with the development of the religious character of America’s middle class. H. Richard Niebuhr had it right in 1929 when he published his chapter on “The Churches of the Middle Class” in Social Sources of Denominationalism. Most Americans (those aspiring to middle class, those in it, or those who have passed through it to greater economic success) practice a works-oriented religion. Thirty years ago, when I was a seminary student, I heard Carlyle Marney, renegade cigar-smoking Southern Baptist minister, say that Americans believe in “salvation by successing.” It was his way of saying what Niebuhr had said nearer the beginning of the century. Americans have adopted understandings of sin, righteousness, and salvation that exalt the ideals of individual worth and responsibility. Sin is not a state within which the human being exists but rather an activity of the individual. Righteousness does not depend upon grace (where God creates a condition within which God sees us “as if” we were righteous), but rather righteousness is something the individual achieves by right action. Righteousness affects society only when enough individuals achieve it. Therefore, noted Niebuhr, for the middle class, salvation becomes an individual process. Salvation does not deliver the individual from remoteness from God as much as from bad habits. Thus Americans admire self-discipline, energy, and the drive to succeed. For example, NBC celebrated this kind of individual discipline and athletic will throughout its coverage of the 2004 Olympics. In this kind of religious expression, salvation has very little to do with grace, but everything to do with character. And it is a character often judged on the basis of what it produces. For Americans, success is the indicator of existing virtue and blessing while failure or poverty reveals sloth, lack of self-discipline, or, in theological terms, sin.

Now how does this relate to baseball and curses?

First, baseball, like the American culture in which it lives and moves and has its being, practices a works-oriented religion. Even though baseball places no one on the field in the major leagues who fits middle-class economic descriptions, the game itself is thoroughly saturated with the middle-class religious ethic. Players, coaches, owners, and even the fans believe success or failure, salvation or damnation, depends on the abilities of the individuals who play the game. If you commit sins, if you are guilty of “errors,” you must act in individual ways to stop them. The process of salvation for players contains steps along the way (vested pensions, long-term contracts, no-trade clauses, mega-salary, MVP and Cy Young awards, Gold Gloves, and, including the community itself, the playoffs and the World Series). Players are ultimately responsible for whether they are deemed “righteous” or not (as in “he is one righteous player”). As Price points out, they follow very strict
rituals in order to avoid the hitting slump, or the bad day on the mound. Even where superstition exists, where individuals use superstition as the scapegoat to avoid personal responsibility, it is the individual who must correctly observe the sacramental superstitious ritual to make things right again. One works toward righteousness again anyway one can. (Admittedly, however, some believe baseball possesses an odd standard for righteousness - you can fail 65% of the time and still become a “righteous” hitter).

Second, Price’s essay reveals the curses affecting both Boston and Chicago seem to the faithful to be beyond their ability to address. This is true even though, in both cities, baseball understands its own sins have in some way contributed to the existence of the curse. In Boston’s case, Jacob Ruppert’s sale of Babe Ruth to the Yankees has even been called the “original Sin.” And, depending on the account, either a Wrigley field usher or P.K. Wrigley himself is responsible for the snubbing of Billy’s goat. The curse is somehow linked to baseball’s own sins, but also somehow connected to something larger than those sins. No one with the Red Sox or the Cubs has been able to bring redemption. The curse lives on. Efforts involving exorcism, spiritual journeys to Mount Everest, burnt offerings of Yankee caps, and diving excursions for a sunken piano have all failed.

Therein lies the tension. Baseball players, teams, and fans, represented especially by those in Boston and Chicago, have come to believe in the reality of a transcendent curse (something over which they seemingly have no control), but, simultaneously, cannot let go of their need to save themselves. The works-oriented theological heritage of baseball is simply unprepared to deal with the ontological reality of existing in a “state of Curse.” If works cannot atone for these sins, if works cannot bring righteousness, if works cannot bring World Series salvation, then what is the faithful to do? What we might term “Baseball’s Dilemma,” at least in Boston and Chicago, shows no sign of letting up.

What baseball in these two cities needs to counter this developing awareness of a transcendent curse is an accompanying sense of transcendent grace, a grace that redeems these teams precisely at the point they realize they can’t save themselves. But belief in grace is really hard to come by in a thoroughly works-oriented sport that awards multi-million dollar contracts for those deemed worthy based on such things as performance and individual statistics. And the repetitive success of those damn dollar-driven Yankees doesn’t make it any easier.

Mark G. Toulouse
Controlling the Chaos: A Response to Joe Price

Author: D. Gregory Sapp (209.172.233.-)
Date: 09-01-04 15:39

Joe Price’s “Conjuring Curses and Supplicating Spirits: Baseball’s Culture of Superstitions,” once again demonstrates Price’s ability to see in the activity of athletic competition a deeply rooted theological truth representative of the human condition (1). In this case, Price delves into the not-so-hidden world of curses and superstitions in baseball. Certainly, other sports have their devotees of superstitions (or, as some apparently prefer to call them, “habits”), but baseball has enough to hold our attention for quite some time.

Price argues that the life of these baseball curses is made possible by a culture that believes in superstition, and it is primarily to this aspect of his paper that I wish to respond. Price is correct to show the blurring of the line between superstition and ritual. One person’s superstition is another’s ritual, and vice versa, depending on one’s perspective, with “ritual” usually carrying positive connotations and “superstition” negative connotations. Both, however, seek to provide the practitioner with some measure of control in an otherwise chaotic environment. Price’s quotation of Dave Dravecky illustrates this truth on both counts. Dravecky sees ritual as the attempt to provide some order and control to the chaotic environment, and he regards ritual as positive and superstition as negative. Similarly, Wade Boggs’s “habits” may not be “superstitions” in his mind, but they do provide a measure of order to his otherwise chaotic life of reacting to wicked pitches and sharply hit ground balls.

These superstitious or ritualistic practices are not confined to professional athletes, though. Each of us lives in a world that is largely chaotic, and each of us has a way of dealing with the chaos surrounding us. We do what we can to impose a sense of order on our world from the way we prepare ourselves for each day’s work in the morning to how we serve and eat meals to the way we put our clothes away in our dressers and closets. To break the routine is to invite the chaotic into our lives, and so we sometimes become rigid with our routines, our traditions, and beliefs.

Sometimes our attempts to order the chaos go beyond basic routine, though. For example, I don’t know how many times I told myself that if I made a particular shot while shooting hoops (or, more commonly, shooting trash to the trashcan) I would get a date with a particular girl or even receive a good grade on a particular school assignment. Sometimes, I still half-believe that as long as I am watching my team on television it will be successful while at other times I believe my being absent from the room will positively affect the team’s success. I have heard of some fans who must sit in the same seat in the stadium or arena for their team to win.

Our attempts to influence the outcome of events that are at least apparently far beyond our control raises some interesting questions. What does this indicate about us as human beings? What or who are we affecting by our rituals/superstitions?

Theologically speaking, who determines which acts are efficacious rituals and which are empty superstitions? Does putting down our stake in one particular religious tradition necessarily mean that we see all other
practices of other religions as empty and silly? Is it possible to see ourselves from the perspective of the other and see our own attempts to control our environment as “superstitions” rather than necessary rituals prescribed by God? How do we know when our rituals will work and when they will not? Is God so easily manipulated by our actions? What explanations do we have when our ritual does not provide the expected outcome?

Joe Price has used sports (baseball, in particular) to show how athletes attempt to control the chaos of their world through rituals, habits, or superstitions. I think this is representative of all of us to some extent. What do you think?

Note
1. See, for example, his From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000). Price also recently appeared on NPR’s Speaking of Faith as Krista Tippett’s guest on the subject of sports and religion (http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2004/08/12_inpraiseofplay/index.shtml).