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HEN MY FATHER HAD his stroke, I skied faster that winter and ran harder and more often, than I ever had in my life. As I look back now, this was the time when I was given my first opportunity to suckle humility. My body alone had always made me feel better. But this time I could not train myself out of the sickening grief. I couldn't outrun it or out ski it. It had me.

It is only now, that I've begun to put the pieces together—to see, to feel, the experience of our creaturehood. Once we understand this, our role, our position *vis-à-vis* the Creator, everything else pretty much falls into place. We are created. We are mortal. Somewhere in those years of his dying and my injury, mortality hit me in the face.

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Greek gods and perfectly balanced *arête* triangles of equilibrium seemed foolish and frivolous. My triangle, my hope to elevate the center point of a flat line to an apex, had been squelched irretrievably, I thought. I became more introverted. Who was out there? What was out there? Was there a benevolent God?

It took me years to answer that: I was given the knowledge not because I was special or graced, but because I was going to need it.

Once you experience the soul within you and its spiritual orientation acting as a guide for the body's course, you can't ignore it. You don't have to believe it, in the sense of having faith, because it does not require your faith in it to exist. God, in the soul within the body, is. If ever there was a total immersion into the present moment, it was Carl Lewis on his last jump of his Olympic career, in front of millions of people worldwide, striking the footplate and soaring to a gold-medal twenty-three feet. It took less than thirty seconds. Every sinew of his body and every sinew of everyone watching were unified into a gasp and then a roar as the stadium exploded into cheers. I was there in Atlanta for that moment, I was seated not more than fifty yards from him when he made that jump. Carl Lewis went into himself that night; and body and soul delivered.

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Perhaps that is the greatness of it, the breakthrough when body and soul are equal and a Herculean task is accomplished by someone who was—a few seconds earlier—just a mortal. For in our current state outside of the Garden of Eden, outside of the perfect will of God, inside this existence on earth in the permissive will of God, our body, at least in our perception, is greater than our soul—because we see the soul as within. However, in an instance such as great love, or a great physical feat—the soul perhaps, equals the boundaries of the physical body, perhaps even spills out in love—and extraordinary feats are accomplished and recognized as being great because of this dual nature of the body—redeemed momentarily, reflecting the essence of its godliness, acts like a god—superhuman.

One such person is the story of Professor Emeritus, John Lucas—Olympic historian. This man was one of my undergraduate teachers at Penn State—a man I both revered and feared. This Boston-bred professor strode into class each morning and said, expecting a proper answer, “Good Morning, Class.” And for some reason, our post 1960s irreverent class all answered, “Good Morning, Dr. Lucas.”

It struck me that this man wore a three-piece suit to teach American and Olympic sports history class. We were a

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class of football players, varsity field hockey players and basic jocks. We didn't know it, but we were being transformed.

It began with understanding that sports were more than tossing or hitting a ball. Sport had a history, an ancient history going back to the Greeks, and that our American sporting history came to us via the Greeks to the Romans to the Middle Ages into the English schoolyard and upon our shores at Plymouth Rock. And this remarkable, staunch and stuffy New Englander was categorically walking our minds through cockfights, Spaulding and baseball, Neismith and basketball. In the middle of this immersion bath, my father died suddenly and I left school abruptly, placing notes in my professors' mailboxes (before the ease of e-mailing them), but I had somehow put his note in the box below, not above, the name John Lucas.

When I returned to school two weeks later, I had missed the midterm. I was still anxious and a bit blown away from the funeral and all the travel (I had packed up my mom from her Florida home and then made arrangements to fly her and my father's body back to Pennsylvania for the funeral). It was all a lot to handle for a twenty-year-old.

My dad's body somehow didn't make the plane when we

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transferred planes in Baltimore and while we flew on, he—detained in a large snowstorm that blanketed the east coast in the late afternoon of the day we took off—rode to his final resting place in the belly of a Greyhound Bus. I thought, even at the time, that this was a particularly entertaining circumstance, something my father was getting a laugh out of.

When he finally got there, nearly late for his own funeral we buried him in Erie, Pennsylvania on January 12 in the middle of a snowstorm ourselves. I will never forget that day of standing by the grave with a winter storm swirling through the makeshift vents of the tent. I did not cry; I only stared at the snowflakes—trying to be one of them, anything but feel the pain of having lost him. The snowflakes were frolicking and floating, a part of the cold scene but comfortable in it. They were beautiful and small in their crystal tenuousness, not hard and wooden like the box resting on the brass holders, which seemed so incongruous with the earth. I never cried, and I spoke to almost no one.

Back at school, I had to face the backlog of tests, work and responsibilities. When I walked into Dr. Lucas's office—on the list of professors I had to see—I stood waiting inside the door, several feet in front of his desk in White

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Building, waiting for him to lift his head and beckon me closer in acknowledgment. When he did, after several uncomfortable moments, I said, "Dr. Lucas, I need to reschedule my midterm" and before I could finish he stood up and glared at me with, "Well, I suppose by now you have gotten all the answers from your classmates and I will have to make up a special new test just for you. Where *were* you anyway?"

At this point, I realized to my horror that he did not get my note.

"Well?" he asked again, closer to me and louder.

"I was at my father's funeral," I managed to say softly more out of fright than sorrow.

He paused, I remember, turned on his heel, walked back behind a large wooden desk that was very boxy and that concealed all that was behind it, and he sat down with a heaviness I had not seen in him, and I remember noting it. He motioned, without a word, for me to sit down in the leather, worn chair that faced the desk. I sat.

He put his hands to his face for a second, I watched him sigh, as now I was totally taken with his movements and

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responses as he had gotten my attention. All I could think as my heart pounded was, “Was he going to flunk me?”

Then he spoke, without looking up, still apparently studying his hands and the top of his desk, “My God” he said in a hush, “Forgive me. I am so very sorry.”

And it was that exchange, fear, yelling, miscommunication, reverence that cemented a relationship that would last the next thirty years and to this day. We had somehow crossed some threshold of acquaintanceship and professor/student relating that landed us smack in the realm of truth and understanding, equal footing, where our souls recognized one another seemingly for the first time.

And, as he got up from his desk to walk me to the door he gently asked, “Please join my wife and me for dinner this Friday, if you haven’t any plans. I’ll give you the address after class tomorrow.”

And there it was. An invitation to eat dinner with the Official Modern Olympic Games Historian of North America, John Lucas. A remarkable man whose own personal Olympic story has been spotlighted in *Sports Illustrated*. It began in 1952. He was a 1500-meter runner who came in third in the Olympic trials—only the first

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two made the team. He saw that the first two runners were from a place called Penn State College and decided that if that was where these two runners were who beat him, then that was where he should be.

So he left and went to Penn State and coached track and became a professor of Olympic sport history. He is a distinguished VIP of almost every Olympic Games in the latter half of the twentieth century, but he never toed the line of an Olympic race. Yet, he has run his 1500-meter Olympic run in every Olympic stadium—climbing over fences, persuading guards—since 1955. And *that* is the spirit of an Olympian—the indomitable spirit that I am trying to write about in this text. There is a drive, greater than normal ambition, that flows from the well of sports.

I remember another story of heroism, the story of a coach and a maintenance man, the man who was responsible for cutting the ice rink out on the lake, as was done all over New England before indoor rinks became the norm, sawing actually, with a tractor pulling a blade that ripped the linear dimension of the rink, scoring it out of the surface of the pond, so that it was essentially a free iceberg within the lake and the cracks and heavings originating from the instabilities on the shore would not affect the oval rink: the ice wound a protective riff.

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He was doing this job one day when the tractor he was riding broke through the black pond ice. The ten- and twelve-year-old-boys with hockey sticks in hand, waiting, had watched and stood unmoving as the maintenance man went along the outside edge. Then, like a slow-motion picture, there was a crash and he went down through the surface with the running tractor whose wheel had jammed in the crack. His pant leg caught in the machinery, its engine still sputtering.

Ice closed over the hole, his cries silenced. The coach, the father of one of the boys—a quiet, undramatic man in the boys’ eyes—quickly moved out from among them and without hesitation dove through the slush, the cold, the wind and, he too, was gone for a second, a long second. The boys began a silent move toward the hole, vigilant, waiting to grab a coat, a hand, anything, when through the black water, gasping and thrashing, clinging for a hold, the two men came up and were alive! Twenty pairs of mittened hands grabbed and pulled at the one man heaving the other! And the two men passed through them and walked away like gods.

“Walked away like gods.” That stuck with me, because I believe that our souls can, at times extend beyond our bodies and drive us to heroic feats, healings and athletic

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accomplishments. The energy of our body *and* soul coupled together is largely untapped by many people, I think, whereas an athlete taps into the soul every time he or she reaches those levels of the body where the boundaries of the body are met and what is beyond the boundary can only be journeyed into and achieved by the impetus of the soul. What is beyond the boundary of the perceived self is what draws us to athletes. They become a bridge for us, from our world to the metaphysical world. They take us to the gods, and we walk among the gods through them. This vicarious relationship fills stadiums every weekend—as our inner athlete seeks to understand, to better learn, the communion of body and soul.

To strive to push one's body in a channeled effort, while seeking to dive into the recesses of the soul for fortitude, courage, strength is a difficult place for humans to put themselves into. Calling upon grace, strength, is one thing—becoming that grace and strength is something greater still. When we are sacrificing, offering *ourselves* for the greater good, the outcome, the finish line—we have broken the barrier of fear, gone through the limit of self and embody creaturehood, gratitude and humility.

This is when champions become heroes. We all have them, some may not look very athletic at all as they age.

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But the heart within them is tangible and infectious. It makes us seek them out so we can be around it.