

KING'S CHAPEL RADIO TALK  
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The Rev. Earl K. Holt III, Minister

There's a famous anecdote about a tourist, lost in the middle of New York City, who desperately asks a passerby, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" and receives the reply: "Practice, practice, practice."

I was reminded of that story as I watched some of the recently-concluded Olympic Games on television. The headlines and most of the attention is lavished on the extraordinary few, the winners, the gold medalists. It is a competition after all, the kind of healthy competitions which brings out the best. By design the winners are few in number. The climb to the top wouldn't be worth the effort if everyone got there. More than ten thousand athletes competed in Beijing, and only a relative handful got to stand on the medal platform or wore the laurel wreath or heard their national anthem played. But you certainly wouldn't call the huge majority of those who didn't win the gold losers! They were all winners, each having pursued a long and arduous regime of training and conditioning, extending usually for years on end, and a series of trials and victories just to achieve the right to compete with the best in the world, at the Olympian level. And in so many events the difference between winning and losing was no more than a fraction of a second or centimeter of distance or a hundredth of point. Nearly the whole field of the thousands of competitors were gathered together for closing celebration and you could see it in their faces: they were all winners, most of all perhaps because they had the privilege of doing what they love, along with extraordinarily talented others who felt the same.

It couldn't happen without love, which is why the right word for them is amateur. The technical difference between amateur and professional has been effectively abolished in the world of sports, which is why the word is hardly used any more with reference to the Olympics, but in its root meaning an amateur is a lover. The fact is that no one would do what Olympic athletes have to do to achieve at the highest levels without it. Dreams of glory or fantasies of fame and riches might not be absent, but they wouldn't matter without simple love of the sport, love of the game.

But love by itself is not enough either, unless it is honed by discipline. Whether it's the violinist stepping on stage at Carnegie Hall or Michael Phelps standing on the platform at the edge of the pool, it comes down to the same thing: Practice, practice, practice.

Most of us have things we do well, and things we do less well, but natural ability by itself is never enough. There are many gifted people whose gifts are never fully realized because they lack sufficient drive or desire, the motivation, to do so.

Extraordinary talent is by definition uncommon, but we learn from watching those possessed of it that what we are born with matters less than what we do with it. Achievement comes slowly, first by finding what we do well and then doing it. It is why we speak of the practice of medicine or the practice of law. We can only learn to do better only by doing, and however we use our gifts there is always more to learn.

All of this applies as well to matters of faith, of our spiritual lives. One of my mentors used to say that life is simply the opportunity to grow a soul. We cannot hope to do so without attention and without the desire to do so. Spiritual growth like any other is matter of cumulative achievement, requiring regular and sustained effort. The Buddhists speak most explicitly of spiritual practice, a kind of spiritual exercise. There are varieties of practice, but all require time and discipline. Something as simple as sitting in silence for 20 minutes once or twice a day requires effort, especially amid the many distractions of life today, but it is a practice that many have found healing and even life-changing. Daily prayers, the regular reading and contemplation of scripture, yoga, Thai Chi, a silent retreat, a bible study group, the possibilities are endless. In our own tradition, worship is the most available resource, providing a time at least once a week to reflect on the deeper meaning of our lives and the yearning of our souls, as well as encouragement which comes by sharing in company with others in contemplation of the deep mysteries of life and death, being reminded that in our spiritual journey we are not alone.

This is Earl Holt, Minister of King's Chapel, located at Tremont and School Streets in Downtown Boston. We invite you to join us for worship on Sundays at eleven o'clock, and to our Mid-week service every Wednesday at 12:15. In the meantime, may you enjoy this blessed day of life, and may you recognize life's blessings for what they are, whenever they come to you.

*Contributions in support of the King's Chapel Radio Talks, broadcast at 8 A.M. every Sunday morning throughout the year on WCRB 99.5 FM, are needed and deeply appreciated. Checks made payable to King's Chapel may be sent to 64 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02018. Please put "Radio Talks" on the Memo line. Thank you.*