Why We Crave Ritual

Why We Crave Ritual And Why Spectator Sports Are a Poor Man's Substitute

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I didn't grow up a sport's fan, have lived in too many places to have anything resembling a hometown team and used to drive a car with a 'Kill Your Television' bumper-sticker on it. These are not things scream basketball addict. But every spring, come NBA playoff season, I spend an unreasonable amount of time watching a game I've never even played.

At a basic level, humans enjoy playing sports because humans enjoy survival. We play fight as kids in case we have to real fight as adults. But we don't become better fighters watching slam dunks, so that doesn't really explain my sports-on-the-tube addiction.

Sure, in polyglot America, our games are our common ground. We no longer live in tiny villages. We meet all kinds of folks, with all kinds of pasts. Sports are what guys who don't know each other talk about. Easy, safe male bonding: always good for the tribe. But ten minute Sport's Center will do that trick, so why the endless hours of game watching?

Sociologists, appropriately, call the above mentioned idea: sport as a socializing agent. Other popular theories include sport as an agent of control, an agent of assimilation, an agent of group identification. Some have argued that, since thrill-seeking is an inborn trait, sports provide a method of controllable thrills. And while this list goes on, I consistently find it incomplete.

On a strictly personal basis, I live in the middle-of-nowhere New Mexico. My neighbors are farmers and most are Hispanic farmers—meaning their game is soccer much more than basketball.

Beyond them, the vast majority of my friends are uninterested in organized sports (preferring skiing, skateboarding, surfing and other such individual pastimes) so there's little opportunity to bond over something they generally find annoying.

And, as I'm Jewish, we're not a minority group known to bond over our athletic abilities.

But over the past few years a new theory has been quietly developing and that theory holds some merit. This new idea is that sport is ritual and our draw towards it follows a

complicated history with peculiar evolutionary roots.

In nature ritual is everywhere in nature. Whales breech, bees dance, wolves dance. In their famous 1979, Spectrum of Ritual, the ethnologist Charles Laughlin and the psychiatrist and anthropologist Eugene D' Aquili tried to figure out why.

Evolutionary theory teaches us that the brain's primary function is to keep an organism alive and reproducing and everything from love to hunger is an expression of this primary function. The proximity of a viable sexual partner produces lust, much as the way a shortage of glucose in the bloodstream produces hunger. Sex and eating, by sating these needs, produces an accompanying pleasure response. Without this, we would stop mating and stop eating.

Laughlin and D'Aquili reasoned that as our brain evolved, this chain of command lengthened. Eating became associated with cooking which became associated with hunting and so forth. In this chain of association, it wasn't just eating that produced pleasure; it was the ritual that surrounded eating that produced pleasure.

The reasoning here is that as our species evolved and grew our nutritional needs grew alongside us. No longer could we anchor ourselves to a rock like a barnacle and eat whatever floated by. If a wolf ate only the stuff that wandered into its mouth, it would be dead within a week. To sustain all that body mass, wolves had to know how to hunt.

And it was wolves that Laughlin and D'Aquili studied. They discovered that before hunting, wolves go through a ceremonial tail-wagging, group-howling session. Since wolves often stalk animals much larger then themselves, this ritualistic activity helped them coordinate the hunt.

From this, they argued that ritual serves two important biological functions: it helps coordinate group behaviour and it teaches the young how to behave. Which is why ritual is everywhere in nature; it's part of the engine that drives nature forward. And for this reason, they deduced that ritual has become a "cognitive imperative."

And just like every other healthy adaptation turned cognitive imperative, we still crave it. Why do we like to go dancing? Wolves dance together to coordinate the hunt. We used to dance to pray to the gods for a good hunt. And the brain can't really tell the difference. Which is why dancing causes the release of so many feel-good and expensive to produce neurochemicals; it's our hunter-gather brain's way of saying keep doing this thing you're doing because it just might save your life some day.

But we no longer hunt our meat in groups. We no longer pray to the same gods for the meat we will soon hunt. In fact, in our modern times, unless you're a Pentecostal Christian or a teenage raver, ours is no longer a world built on shared ecstatic experience.

But our brain, which has not adapted as fast as our society, still craves the 'cognitive imperative' of ritual. We crave that neurochemical release, but our modern lives rarely provide it.

But watching sport's on TV does.

Spectator sports follow all of the standard definitions of ritual (more on this in my next blog) and my addiction to hoops is nothing more than the poor man's substitute for this old school necessity.

A fact that helps explain why, when the team I'm rooting for wins, my body is flooded with feel-good neurochemicals. And, since the production of neurochemicals also produces new receptor sites for those neurochemicals to bond to, a chain of chemical craving is set up. My brain believes this combination serves to reinforce a pattern of behaviour critical to my survival.

Thus, night after night, I am compelled to watch basketball is because a trick of evolution has taught my brain to believe this watching is critical to my survival.

And really, who am I to disagree.