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**Simone Biles: Learning From Her Olympic Experience**

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In the Tokyo Olympics completed in August, 2021, one of the most important story lines involved not a gold medal winner but a bronze medal won by the great gymnast Simone Biles. Even in the midst of the ongoing Covid crisis, the Summer Games drew more than 11,000 athletes from over 200 countries and attracted millions of viewers from all over the world. Although American viewership was down considerably from previous Olympics, still NBC reported some 15 million Americans on average watched during prime time.

Since the revival of the modern Olympics in 1896 in Athens, gold medal winners have caught the imagination of the public. For example, Jim Thorpe, the Native American, won two gold medals in the 1913 Stockholm Games, earning him the reputation as the best all-around athlete of his time; Jesse Owens, the black American sprinter, won four golds in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, refuting Hitler’s racist ideology; Mary Lou Retton, the American gymnast, won the women’s all-around gold medal in the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, gaining her the nickname “America’s Sweetheart;” Jackie Joyner-Kersee, the America track and field star, won gold medals in the heptathlon in Seoul 1988 and Barcelona 1992, making her one of the greatest female athletes of all time; and Michael Phelps, the American swimmer, won a total of 23 Olympic gold medals, the last four at the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro, confirming his reputation as the greatest swimmer of all time.

At the Tokyo Olympics, however, it was bronze medal winner Simone Biles who captured the attention of the American public. Simone was born March 14, 1997, in Columbus, Ohio, the daughter of Shannon Biles, a single mother of four who was not able to care for her children because of drug problems. At age 6, Simone was adopted by a couple living near Houston, Texas, where she quickly developed an interest in gymnastics and began intense training that led to amazing success, including 14 world championship titles by 2015. At the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Simone won four gold medals, including victories in the individual all-around, the balance beam and the floor exercise.

Going into the Tokyo Olympics, Biles was generally considered the greatest female gymnast of all time, and expectations were high that she would win four gold medals as she did in Rio. However, all was not well with Simone herself. Sometime in 2019, she suddenly realized that she had been sexually violated by Larry Nassar, the USA Gymnastics (USAG) doctor, who inappropriately touched hundreds of female gymnasts under the guise of medical treatment. Facing this appalling truth for the first time, Simone cried uncontrollably, became depressed and sought therapy. She was extremely angry at the USAG for failing to protect her and the other victims and began to feel that nobody cared about her as a person, but only wanted her to win medals so they could capitalize on her fame. Nevertheless, Simone gathered herself and tried to prepare herself for the delayed Tokyo Olympics in 2021.

According to a July 30th recorded interview with veteran *New York Times* reporter Juliet Macur, Simone was not her familiar self during her preparations for Tokyo. She gave fewer interviews and kept them short. In response to Macur’s question about the happiest moment in her career, Simone said, “It was during my time off.” She went on to say: “My ankles really hurt. It hurts to walk. I’m tired. I’m old. The sport has taken a toll on my body.” Then she made a telling comment: “I really want to find out who I am,” and added that she could not wait for the Olympics to end. Her emotional state affected her performance. In the June Olympic trials, she actually fell off the beam during her performance, leaving her in tears, distressed that she was disappointing so many people. Commentators said not to worry because Simone would be back in good form for the actual Olympics.

However, on the first day of the gymnastics competition in Tokyo, she performed poorly both in the floor exercise, where she actually slid off the competition carpet and in the balance beam, where she stumbled on her landing. Despite these problems in the early rounds, there was a general expectation that she would regain her usual excellence in the finals. Once again, however, Simone did not meet expectations, performing poorly in the vault. The TV commentators said, “Very uncharacteristic vault for Simone. But it looks like she got lost in the air.” After that fiasco, Simone consulted with her doctor and coach and briefly left the arena. She then returned to tell her tearful teammates that she could not continue and insisted they would be just fine without her. In subsequent interviews, Simone said she was not in the “right head space,” not fully focused, which put her in danger of serious injury. She made the decision to take care of herself and let her teammates take over. She explained she was suffering from the “twisties,” which meant she was not able to keep track of her body as she maneuvered in space making it difficult to land properly.

After limiting herself to cheering for her teammates, Simone decided to participate in the balance beam final. She simplified her routine but did well enough to earn the bronze medal. In her subsequent interviews, she said that this bronze medal meant more to her than her many gold medals. After confessing that she competed for her own good, she declared, “Right now, I just feel like I have to go home and work on myself and be okay with what’s happened.”

The Olympic ordeal of Simone Biles sparked a national discussion of her personal decision as well as the larger issue of sports and mental illness. Some prominent conservative commentators criticized Simone for being selfish and weak. For example, Clay Travis called on her to apologize to her teammates for quitting and not being there for them, a ”fundamental breach of the most important aspect of team sports.” Charlie Kirk called her a “selfish sociopath” and “a shame to the country,” adding that we are raising a “generation of weak people like her.”

On the other hand, affirmation for Simone and her decisions came from various sources. For example, Michael Phelps, the champion Olympic swimmer who has spoken publicly about his own battle with depression, said Simone’s struggles broke his heart and expressed hope that her story would open up a broader discussion of mental health issues. *The New York Times* lauded her decision “to put her mental health first and the expectations of others at best second.” Athleta, an ad agency that sponsors Biles, issued a statement supporting her withdrawal from the Olympics: “Being the best also means knowing how to take care of yourself. We are inspired by her leadership today and are backing her every step of the way.” Other sponsors called her decision “incredibly brave,” and “an inspiration to us all.” Reacting to the inhumane treatment of American female gymnasts, Dominique Moceanu praised Simone for demonstrating “that we have a say in our own health – a say I never felt I had as an Olympian.”

Writing in *Commonweal* magazine, theologian Susan Bigelow Reynolds argued that Simone’s refusal to “power through“ was a prophetic act, challenging the win-at-all-costs philosophy of the USGA culture that treats “the health and safety of female gymnasts as collateral damage in a drive for national and institutional prestige.”

For me, Simone’s whole Tokyo Olympics experience is an inspiring example of what the respected Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls the “ethics of authenticity.” In his book of that title, Taylor argues that the individualism prevalent in western democracies since the 18th century Enlightenment, flawed as it is, retains a positive moral ideal to become our own best self. As authentic individuals, we have the root capacity to break free from external constraints and to decide for ourselves. Authenticity demands that we be true to ourselves and develop our own unique potential. Authentic persons do not seek self-fulfillment by conforming to the expectations of others but by following their own conscience. On the other hand, Taylor insisted that self-fulfillment can only be authentic if it takes into account legitimate social norms, cultural values and the needs of others. From this analysis of authenticity we can appreciate Simone’s Olympic decisions as an inspiring example of a valuable ideal most Americans already hold.

We can also reflect on Simone’s story from the perspective of Catholic spirituality. This is fitting because she herself relies heavily on her Catholic faith for strength and guidance as she made clear in her autobiography, *Born to Soar,* written as a teenagerand in recent interviews as a 24-year-old woman.

During his pontificate, Pope Francis has put great emphasis on the spiritual practice of discernment, which involves prayerful reflection prompting good decisions in tune with God’s plan for our salvation. For Francis, discernment has a number of common characteristics. For example, it is a gift from God that we can develop through regular spiritual practices; it involves examining both our internal sentiments and external circumstances; it can be employed in making big decisions and in the choices that make up ordinary life; it can alert us to the threats posed by social sin and the opportunities for spiritual growth supported by divine grace; it can help us to avoid spiritual fads and to recognize the paths that bring us closer to Christ.

Without pretending to know the secrets of Simone’s inner life, we can detect elements of a discernment process, if implicit, in her public statements. Throughout her life, she has consistently relied on God’s help and worked hard to develop her God-given gifts. In her decision to withdraw from the Olympic events, she demonstrated a discerning inner spirit: recognizing the disconnect between her mind and body, which made soaring through air dangerous; acknowledging the minor injuries that made her feel old; rejecting the win-at-all-costs philosophy; and accepting responsibility for her own life and health.

In withdrawing, Simone was very solicitous for her younger teammates, not wanting to cost them a medal by a poor performance on her part. Positively, she worked hard to build up their confidence before the events began, rooted vigorously for them during the competition and rejoiced heartily with them after they won a silver medal.

In deciding to compete in the final balance beam event, Simone said she did it for herself; and when she won a bronze medal, she explained in an interview that it meant more than all of the golds because she had to push through so many emotional challenges to compete well enough to win third place.

As we have seen, on the world’s biggest sports’ stage, the Olympic Games, the greatest female gymnast of all time, Simone Biles, exemplified both the American ideal of ethical authenticity and the Christian practice of spiritual discernment.

The whole Olympic saga of Simone Biles can encourage all of us to grow spiritually through some specific efforts: striving to become more authentic persons by attention to the call of conscience and the needs of others; developing the gift of discernment by regular prayer and self-examination; achieving a healthier attitude toward athletic competition which avoids making an idol out of winning and appreciates the inherent power of sports to lift the human spirit and celebrate athletic excellence; gaining greater respect for the spiritual journey of other persons of good will; dealing better with our own weaknesses and limitations; challenging injustice in our own sphere of influence; and finally, praying for all those struggling with emotional problems and mental illness.