

# *Global Handball*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Earlier this month, many of us honored our dearly departed during our annual days of the dead commemoration. One of the ancestors in my family, which holds a place in that honoring, is my maternal grandfather, for whom I hold many memories.

One of my memories when visiting my grandfather was finding him lounging, as he was enthralled by a sport that I had trouble understanding. Being in Mexico, I was familiar enough with *association football* – soccer, as it is more commonly known here. After all, Mexico hosted the 1986 FIFA World Cup when I was a kid – this is the Cup when Argentinian player Diego Maradona scored both the celebrated “Goal of the Century”, as well as the controversial “Hand of God Goal”, which was a goal “guided” by Maradona’s hand, though the referees didn’t see. And while I wasn’t part of the soccer fandom, it was hard to miss the large crowds that gathered before and after a game, or the fact that there were seemingly endless games on TV, apparently devoted to making me miss the latest episode of *The Smurfs*.

Even with my tepid interest in *soccer* football, I understood the intuitive dynamic of the game – you put a ball in the opposing team’s net, without using your hands (unless you were the goalie... or Diego Maradona). This is also one of the first lessons in English for many Spanish-speakers, as we come to understand that the game’s name, *football* is essentially a basic instruction manual on how to play it.

But my grandfather was a much bigger fan of *another* kind of football, *American Football*. And the dynamics of his passion were much more

difficult for me to understand. OK, so people from the US call themselves American, and that's where the game comes from, that part made sense, but... why *football*? The feet only came in contact with the ball a minuscule amount of the active playtime. By that logic, I once reasoned, soccer could be called "Global Handball" – it's played all over the world, so it's global, and goalies touch the ball with their hands every so often, so it could legitimately be called "handball" in the same way that the American version was "football" – or saw I've reasoned at some point.

Semantic quibbles aside, my grandfather explained the subtleties of the game to me, and I even came to appreciate the excitement of a 4<sup>th</sup>-down-and-9 that might turn into a memorable long pass. Years later, when my Canadian high-school became the national champions in American football, I showed up to the games and participated in the school spirit, even painting my face in blue and white – the school colours.

Now, I don't know what kind of football you might be into – or if you're into any sport at all. But in about a week, a new season for football (or Global Handball) is coming, as the FIFA World Cup in Qatar opens on November 20, and with Canada's team qualifying for the first time in decades, we might have more neighbours flying flags and cheering as each new game comes along.

Now, I know there are some among you who are big fans of professional sports... and I know that it's hard to speak of these without sounding divisive – at some point or *another*! There are some folks who are *really* into professional sports, and some who are more mellow about them. Heck, even among those who *are* into sports, there are those who are into one particular game and not into another kind of game. And even among those who are into the *same* sport, there are split loyalties among all the different teams, not to mention players, coaches, strategies, fantasy leagues, and a whole bunch of dimensions that I won't pretend to understand.

All this to say, I know this can be a contentious subject, perhaps even more so than religion. Come think of it... it might be accurate to describe some of the followings of professional sport as reflections of a secular religion. I remember my years in Montreal, when the Canadiens got to the Stanley Cup playoffs... many people watching the game at the pub, wearing their “holy flannel” Habs scarves, were devotedly clasping their hands, as if in prayer.

Now, rest assured, although I’m not usually in any particular sport fandom, I can appreciate the world of professional sports, and even more so, sports in general. Over all, I think they are a net positive, and there are many good reasons for that, some of which we may talk about.

There are also... some uncomfortable aspects about the world of professional sports, especially when they are held at the national and global levels.

Already, the current FIFA World Cup, which is being held in Qatar has brought up many questions about the suitability of the host country. These range from practical issues, such as its dry heat weather, to principled questions about its human rights record. Indeed, this year’s World Cup, and its host, have had a full quota of controversy.

Of course, controversy is not new to World Cup events, or even to FIFA, as these questions also come up regularly with the Olympics and other major sporting events. Many of the host countries for worldwide sporting events routinely face questions about their human rights records, their employment practices in construction, the displacement of low-income families and local businesses for construction of venues, or even for the suitability of the local climate. That’s without even mentioning perennial incidences of corruption and abusive behaviour, be it in specific governments or in sporting organizations.

I could list a whole bunch of places and issues, but each of these can be a long discussion on its own. Nonetheless, these are important questions to keep in mind. And let’s not forget that some of this

scrutiny may come closer to home in four years' time, when Canada, the US, and Mexico, all come together to share hosting duties for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

At the same time, international sporting events are touted as promoting the health and wellbeing of the global population. And there are good reasons to link sports with wellbeing. Of course, *any* physical activity, including walking, sit-down exercises, yoga, or dancing, has been extensively documented to measurably improve the health of body and mind. And team sports, in particular, can offer a place for communal and social interaction, as well as promoting team-building skills and setting norms for working toward a common goal – often quite literally a common *goal*.

Even purely on their entertainment value, sports and their related events offer a fulfilling passion for billions of people, as some of our church's members will attest.

Moreover, there is a case to be made that international sporting events promote a sense of international community. Even with my very mild interest in sporting events, I have to admit that I find opening ceremonies for the Olympics quite fascinating. As I implied before, there is a certain spiritual, I daresay religious, dimension to these – they are ceremonies after all, with a spirit of celebration. And the choreography and storytelling that comes with these events, as well as the coming together of many nations, certainly plays a role in reminding viewers from all over the world that... there is a lot to the world, and the people who live in it.

But this comes tied up with the inherent rivalry that comes with a competitive set of sports, especially when the teams are divided by nationality. When a newly-unified Germany won the 1990 World Cup, I recall some people wondering what a renewed sense of German national pride might mean for global stability (this turned out not to be a major issue, but I heard people raising this question seriously). Some time after scoring “the Hand of God Goal” against the English team,

Argentinian player Diego Maradona implied that his illegal goal had been revenge for the Falklands War with the UK a few years earlier. There's even a certified Football War – an actual war that resulted after a soccer game dispute between El Salvador and Honduras.

The actual value of these assets and liabilities can sometimes be hard to measure, and it might be unfair to tie any of the problems that come with these events with the sports or the games themselves.

Indeed, many of these problems are persistently present outside of the sporting world, and these issues are often more related to how institutions run themselves, be they sporting associations, governments, religious groups, clubs, or businesses. Whenever there is a system in place by which things need to get done, it is important to ask how these systems may lead to some behaviours and outcomes.

For instance, Ruben Jongkind, a coach and advisor in several Dutch professional football clubs, promotes an approach that emphasizes sport as a way to connect and grow together, in terms of physical, mental, and community health, with a lesser emphasis on winning as the only goal. This is not to say that sport shouldn't ever be competitive – there are advantages to having a dose of healthy competition to drive self- and team-improvement – but it *is* to say that, when focusing exclusively on competition and winning as the main goal, we risk losing sight of the other gifts that sports have to offer to individuals and the community.

My friends, I haven't brought up this conversation to admonish anyone for liking the sport or game that you might like – it is important to have passions, especially those that connect you to things larger than yourself. The benefits of sport and team games, whether you actively engage in one, or enjoy watching it at an arena or at home, are many.

It is also important, my friends, to remain mindful of the risks that come when scoring goals becomes the *only* goal. And to maintain an active awareness of the impacts that certain systems in sports organizations, or any institution for that matter, can have in areas that go beyond the

games themselves, especially when these can affect large populations and vulnerable people.

There are no easy answers, my friends, but there are important questions to ask if we want to turn the world around, be it at the World Cup, or in the playground.

So may it be,  
In the spirit of fair play,  
Amen

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*Suggested Hymns:*

**Opening #1036 Calypso Alleluia**

~)| Words & Music: Thomas Benjamin , 1940- , © 2004 Thomas Benjamin

**Hymn #1020 Woyaya**

Words & Music: Loughty Amoa, Solomon Amarfio, Robert M. Bailey, Roy Bedeau, Francis T. Osei, Whendell K. Richardson, and Mac Tontoh © 1993 Chapell & Co., Inc.

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~)| Transcribed from Ysaye M. Barnwell, 1946- ,

~)| arr. Jeannie Gagne, 1960-

**Closing #1074 Turn the World Around**

Words & Music: Harry Belafonte, 1927- and Robert Freedman, © 1975 Clara Music Publishing Corp. (ASCAP).

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~)| Arr. Jason Shelton, 1972-