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Film Review

The Mystical Aspect of Athletics in *The Peaceful Warrior*

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In contemporary society, sports have succumbed to Vince Lombardi's maxim, "Winning is everything." World champion gymnast-turned-author Dan Millman does not dismiss winning as unimportant but shows that the real objective lies in the journey, and that perhaps one must lose everything before he can learn the important things. In his best-selling novel *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (1980) and the film adapted from it, "Peaceful Warrior" (2006), Millman wins more important things than trophies; he conquers himself. This is an intense, powerful drama of the often-used theme of sports as a metaphor for life.

The protagonist in "Peaceful Warrior" is named Dan Millman and is a younger, fictionalized version of the author. The film's opening scene is a dream in which Millman, a college gymnast aspiring to be chosen for the U.S. Olympic team, imagines his body in flight, exceeding his physical limitations on the rings. The shadow side of success is the prospect of failure. Millman's dream becomes a nightmare when he misses the matt and hits the gym floor, shattering his leg like a clay pot. An unseen janitor in mismatched shoes is glimpsed sweeping the broken pieces into the dustbin.

As it turns out, Millman's dream is not merely a psychic register of his anxieties but a response to a more ancient interpretation of the meaning of dreams. Millman will meet the man in mismatched shoes, a figure of destiny, later that night. In the weeks to come he will suffer an accident that shatters his leg and threatens to shatter his dream of Olympic competition. Shorn of the one goal he had set for himself, Millman gives in to destructive rage, lashing out at his gymnastic trophies in frustration over his athletic impotence, projecting his anger over his apparent failure at the symbols of his previous success. Despairing, he contemplates suicide, but pulls back.

The narrative corresponds in key points to mythic stories from the canon of Joseph Campbell. The Millman character at the opening of *Peaceful Warrior* is a shallow, spoiled child of privilege who encounters an archetypal white-bearded mentor figure who initiates him into an enlightened, holistic understanding of his own purpose and the meaning of existence. The protagonist undergoes a severe trial, the accident shattering his knee, but emerges stronger from the crisis, a hero who inspires others.

The mentor figure is never called by his own name but answers to Socrates, a moniker bestowed on him by Millman, who was scornful of the old man's philosophy. However, the disdain barely concealed a subconscious need or awareness of his own inadequacy that drew Millman to Socrates again and again, despite or perhaps because of the latter's prickly manner and the challenges to commonsense reality he set forth.

Tinged with the mystical and able to accomplish seemingly miraculous feats, Socrates is a mysterious and paradoxical man of deep humility and humble circumstances. He is the gruffly accommodating attendant at a Texaco station. When scornful Millman demands to know why someone who knows so much is working at a gas station, Socrates replies, "It's a service station. We offer service. There is no higher purpose."

Socrates never alludes to his background

nor does he attach any label or description to his spiritual path. Like the book's author, he appears to draw from an eclectic range of Eastern sources. Socrates is demonstrably adept with martial arts, flipping his young protégé off the side of a bridge and into the river below without exertion. "You can live a whole lifetime without ever being awake," he says, echoing the early twentieth-century Armenian mystic Gurdjieff. His insistence that everything one needs to know can be found inside oneself sounds Gnostic in origin.

Millman enjoys success in the training room when he applies Socrates' counsel to filter out random thoughts or distractions, to "take out the trash" that clutters his consciousness. The idea is derived from meditation techniques. As a result of Socrates' advice, Millman achieves a mental clarity enabling him to reach an ideal flow between body, mind, and spirit. The athlete appreciates the practical application of Socrates' insights, but remains narcissistic and careless in his wider life, trapped in a paradigm of materialism and with success, as defined by society, as his sole external measurement of worth.

Always in a hurry and living only for a future that may never come, Millman habitually races his motorcycle to gymnastics practice, weaving dangerously through traffic in order to arrive on time. One day his unreflective chase after the receding future ends in a terrible accident on the road. Fulfilling the dream prophesy at the onset of the film, Millman flips through the air and lands on the hard surface of the streets, shattering his leg. Would the archetypal mentor in his mismatched shoes be on hand to sweep away the debris of his hopes?

The accident is part of the classic arc of dramatic storytelling, in which a problem is posed and must be overcome, and also corresponds to the trial of a hero's quest. Millman's coach, a decent man operating within the limits of everyday practicality, dismisses Millman's efforts to regain his gymnastic prowess. According to his physicians, Millman would be hard pressed to walk again much less compete on the rings. Inspired by the perspectives learned from Socrates, Millman excels beyond society's expectations, putting conventional wisdom and medical science alike to shame.

One of the chief lessons Millman absorbs from Socrates is that the present is the point at which a person is alive, not the past or the future. Once, asked what time it is, Socrates replies, "The time is now." To be fully in the moment means, among other things, the power to summon all of one's potential to the task at hand. It means to fully engage with reality, which for an athlete in competition means sharp focus on the physical means and emotional-spiritual objectives of the sport. The clutter of news media attention and fans roaring from the stands would be a distraction as much the thought of the honors and trophies society bestows on winners. In his everyday life Millman is able to slow down his focus and notice seemingly insignificant events to which he had been oblivious, but which now become meaningful.

There is also an almost incidental love interest imbedded in the story. An attractive young woman, a student at the University of California-Berkeley where Millman is also a student, is a friend of Socrates. She appears and reappears sporadically. Once, she approaches Millman, who is recovering from his injury, resting under a tree, wondering if he will ever compete again. She places her hand over his heart, transferring to him her Reiki energy. He complains to her that it is his legs that are hurt and she responds, "But it is your heart that is broken." A postscript to the movie reveals that the two were later married.

California wins the gymnastics national championships, led by Millman, and Socrates mysteriously disappears because he is no longer needed. We are led to believe that the mystical character is, in fact, Millman's own "Higher Self." His excruciating journey was in fact a road to understand himself. In the final analysis he could answer the question that stumped him when first posed by Socrates: "Are you happy?"

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The Binion "What Makes Europeans European Symposium" is upcoming in 2009.