

Chariots of Fire: An Identity Crisis

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At a prestigious academic institution like Georgetown, trying to find self-identity is an endeavor fraught with both limitless possibilities and daunting challenges. One of University's core values, *cura personalis*, or care for the whole person, emphasizes the goal of students developing a unique and well-rounded sense of individuality. Yet, a certain measure of conformity also prevails. Whether manifested in stepping around the seal or faithfully consuming your body's weight in Leo's chicken fingers every Thursday, the pressure felt by every Georgetown student to honor tradition is evident.

"Unity in diversity," a more modern Georgetown phrase, remains the most difficult goal to achieve. The college student is confronted with discovering what part of "diversity" contains his or her individual identity. That same compelling question of identity absorbs the Great Britain's track stars in Hugh Hudson's Academy Award-winning 1981 drama about the 1924 Paris Olympic Games, *Chariots of Fire*. The story begins in a university setting parallel to Georgetown, where entering Cambridge freshmen are reminded of their status as members of the privileged elite. At the annual freshmen's dinner the master tells the incoming class, "Let me exhort you. Examine yourselves. Let each of you discover where you true chance

at greatness lies...Seize this chance. Rejoice in it and let no power or persuasion deter you in your task." It is a tale of personal motivation, faith, and character.

"Diversity" certainly prevails among the young track and field stars that represent Great Britain's best hopes at the Olympics in Paris. From the cynical son of a Jewish doctor, Harold Abrahams, to the carousing aristocrat, Lord Andrew Lindsay, the team of competitors who ultimately advance to the 1924 Olympics represent a broad array of backgrounds and ideologies. Once pitted against each other on the track, the "diversity" of their responses to pressure, from within and without, becomes even more apparent.

The most marked contrast takes place between the Jewish law student, Harold Abrahams, and the Scottish missionary and former rugby player, Eric Liddell. Eric presents an effective foil to the young flamboyant Cambridge students that are among his Olympic teammates. Even beyond their training credentials, Eric and Harold represent juxtaposed approaches to winning. Eric is a devout Christian who attributes victory to the grace of God, while Harold views victories on the track as a defense to anti-Semitic sentiments preventing his acceptance by Britain's elite. Eric gives moving post-race talks explaining to fans that

his purpose in running is to bring glory to God. He states,

You came to see a race today. To see someone win. It happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it. I want to compare faith to running in a race. It's hard. It requires concentration of will, energy of soul. You experience elation when the winner breaks the tape - especially if you've got a bet on it. But how long does that last? You go home. Maybe you're dinner's burnt. Maybe you haven't got a job. So who am I to say, "Believe, have faith," in the face of life's realities? I would like to give you something more permanent, but I can only point the way. I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone runs in her own way, or his own way. And where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said, "Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. If with all your hearts, you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me." If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race.

Harold, on the other hand, once expresses to his love interest, Sybil Gordon, his ultimatum between failure and success: "If I can't win, I won't run." Harold bases his whole identity on his external achievements, while Eric is motivated by the testimony of his efforts, not the outcome.

Ironically, the "unity" of the team is heavily affected by the individual struggles of its members. Harold Abrahams destroys the "unity" of the team on and off the track with his zealous commitment to his own self-advancement. He steals the girl his best friend has been pursuing, pushes friends away, defies university deans, and even jeopardizes his amateur standing by

hiring a trainer to improve his chances at success. Eric, on the other hand, while never becoming close with his British teammates, still manages to gain their respect and admiration. Eric's security in his own identity does not always work in his favor, however.

Liddell's unshakeable resolve in his personal convictions climaxes when he learns en route to the Paris that his preliminary 100 meter race will be run on Sunday. It is his conviction that he cannot run on the Sabbath. So great is his resistance to the idea that Mr. Liddell is actually brought before Great Britain's Olympic Committee in their effort to persuade him to abandon his religious sentiments and not throw away his chance at an Olympic gold medal. Even in the face of pressure from powerful figures including the Prince of Wales, Eric stands his ground. They are mystified at Liddell's unwavering sense of principle and purpose.

When Eric appears to have reached a stalemate with his persuaders his teammate Lord Lindsay magnanimously intervenes and offers to allow Eric to run in his place in the 400 meter race, much to everyone's relief. Although it is important to note that ultimately both Abrahams and Liddell won gold medals, the off-field depiction of these two athletes' personal struggles forms a more compelling story than the actual competition.

At Georgetown University and in Washington, DC, we are surrounded by powerful figures. It is easy when surrounded by trappings of prestige, wealth, and power, not to mention persuasive intellect, to lose sight of what is most important. Liddell was faced with a choice between giving up his chance of competing in the Olympics or abandoning the foundational principles he would argue had brought him there.

In the end, Liddell did get to run, but not without sacrifice. The council did not truly understand his motivations or his resolute

character. They could not. Newspapers and people in Scotland questioned his character and patriotism. For them, the politics surrounding success was what shaped identity, rather than some force from within. Outside forces, rather than inside ones, defined who they were. If Eric had given into the pressure to run on a Sunday, maybe he would have led a very different life. Eric Liddell won a gold medal at the Olympics, but went on to serve as a missionary to China and died there in a Japanese internment camp at age 43.

There are inevitably tough times in life when the natural response may be that of Harold: "If I can't win, I won't run." Sybil's smart response is "If you don't run, you can't win." Eric was more grounded. With every viewing of this classic, I am more and more amazed by the unwavering consistency of Eric's resolve, whether it be

before his sister or in the presence of his future king. Eric states, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but He also made me fast."

College can be a challenging time as we seek to find God's purpose for our own lives. We each have been blessed with our own gifts. At times we may want to define our lives based on those gifts and seek to match our life's purpose to our gifts. As we seek to learn who we are among this diverse group of students we should not be afraid to run and seek to discover where our true chance at greatness lies. But, we must not sacrifice our higher purpose in search of the power and prestige that is ever-present.

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