

Are Combat Sports Spiritual?

Life, resiliency, and military readiness

by LT Mark J. Won, Chaplain, USN

"Beginning in October, the Marine Corps will be emphasizing all components of fitness, particularly the physical and spiritual aspects."¹

—Gen Robert B. Neller

Spirituality is an ever-growing concept, one that shows no sign of turning back. It can be a category of life, resiliency, and mission readiness if we can better articulate what it is and how it can be useful in our context. This article will examine the motivation behind combat sport athletes and attempt to capture the spiritual contours of their experiences. The goal is to better understand the perceived spiritual desires in combat athletes and place them into categories. The implications are significant for leadership, further study, and even personal growth.

We have limited the scope of our analysis to combat sports for two reasons. First, combat contains more risk factors than most other sports, such as ping pong or golf; hence, the stories of its competitors usually have a heightened intensity to them. In other words, all the stakes are elevated and more is revealed about the individuals who are willing to put themselves on the line. As in all storylines, conflict reveals character—the greater the conflict, the more we learn about the subject. Additionally, combat sports, such as martial arts, already have imbedded within them a deep philosophy of life and lend themselves to more meaningful and spiritual considerations. The purpose of the article is not to simply

juxtapose spirituality and combat sports but rather to think of spirituality from the vantage point of the athletes, discussing what the contact sport offers an individually spiritually. While the outward achievements of such athletes are often the center of public attention, further analysis will show that less tangible and more inward desires and needs ultimately drive these individuals.²

We will examine this topic in categories I have described as pursuing transcendence, a way to moral progress, and hooked on flow to help organize a basic understanding of spiritual motivators found among combat athletes. Drawing from insights from both researchers and athletes in boxing and martial arts, we will capture some of the compelling reasons behind why they participate. The article will conclude with a reflection on implications for leadership.

Spirituality Defined

The growing popularity of the study of spirituality has resulted in an increase in confusion about its meaning.³ While many are engaging the topic of spiritual-

ity, the definitions and uses of its associated term are as diverse as the discipline's numerous authors. They are people in business, politics, religion, sports, and the social sciences, all writing on ways an individual can improve the quality of his inner life. Perhaps working with and not against this amorphous term presents a better way forward. In her recent book, *The Ecology of Spirituality: Meanings, Virtues, and Practices in a Post-Religious Age*, Lucy Bregman states that,

It is part of our argument that no such precise entity as spirituality really exists in the same way that, say, seedless watermelons now exist but did not when I was a child. The quest for such a once-and-for-all accurate and unambiguous meaning for spirituality is at one level a fool's errand. The term is deeply and irrevocably ambiguous, and the construction of definitions, and of the whole concept, is a study in how multiple meanings, agendas, and issues are gathered together into one word made to do duty for a whole aggregate of hopes and yearnings.⁴

Because of the subjective nature of the term, we will refer to Viktor Frankl's usage in his pioneering work in logotherapy for this study.

Logotherapy is a therapy which starts from man's spirit; it recognizes and respects man's psycho-physico-spiritual unity—his biopsychospiritual reality. Frankl labels it 'a psychotherapy in spiritual terms.'⁵

For Frankl, the spiritual composition of a person is an accessible reality for all, as real as the biological and psychological. In seeing the limitations of relegating all non-physiological activities as psycho-

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logical, he mapped out the contours for a therapeutic engagement of what was a largely ignored aspect in psychotherapy. In a nutshell, logotherapy seeks to bring people to meaning-making activities and engage their *will to meaning*. This process is a spiritual activity, though not exclusively.

Whether one calls the source spirit the soul, or true self as in the monastic tradition, is secondary. There is too much imagination, wonder, hope, and existential mystery involved in the process of meaning making to limit experiences exclusively to functions of physiology.⁶

As a Holocaust survivor, Frankl's own journey from psychotherapy to logotherapy was born out of necessity. It was there that he discovered the infinite capacity of the human spirit. Coupled with the imagination, his own meaning-making efforts nurtured real hope, ultimately helping him survive the concentration camp. He writes,

In spite of all the enforced and mental primitiveness of the life in a concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom. Only in this way can one explain the apparent paradox that some prisoners of a less hardy make-up often seemed to survive camp life better than did those of a robust nature.⁷

Rather than exegesis the spiritual implications of combat sports from the vantage point of theology,⁸ this study will work from the inside out. Using Frankl's framework, it assumes that all people possess spiritual capacity and the ability to engage in thought and actions to either advance or hinder spiritual well-being. Unlike religion, to use Frankl's distinction, the focus of spirituality is on helping while religion is concerned with saving.⁹ A follow-on question to the one raised in this essay's introduction would be, "how is combat sports conducive to spiritual flourishing?"



Combat sports contain more risk factors. (Photo by LCpl Devan Barnett.)

Spirituality In Combat Sports

Unlike the sport psychology community, which has developed the topic of cognitive influences among athletes and sport for some time now, the study of spiritual significance in sport is a relatively new field in need of wider academic engagement. The growing number of theologians and philosophers in recent years arguing for the need to think more philosophically about the meaning of sport participation and competition is a welcome change.¹⁰ Longtime sport philosophy professor R. Scott Kretchmar "has recently suggested that in studying sport 'to do ethics in vacuo,' without some sort of metaphysical (i.e., religious) basis is a questionable endeavor." He argues that athletes are "meaning-seeking, story-telling creatures" who immerse themselves in experiences of excellence and self-discovery in competition.¹¹ Some sport psychologists have also joined the movement and critiqued the current dominance within their discipline of positivistic research and cognitive-behavioral consultancy techniques advocating the need for more holistic, philosophical, existential, and spiritual and religious approaches.¹²

In what is a groundbreaking project on the "Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports," editors Raúl Sánchez García and Dale C.

Spencer cite sociologist Loïc Wacquant with respect to sport and religion and the transformation of the self:

By willfully adhering to the dictates of the ethic of sacrifice, boxers tear themselves from the everyday world and create a moral and sensual universe that 'elevate the individual above himself' and 'affords [them] a life very different, more exalted and more intense' than that to which their mundane circumstances would consign them—which is Émile Durkheim's definition of religion. By embracing fistic faith, prizefighters make themselves over into living embodiments of professional morality.¹³

Durkheim's definition of religion as a self-elevating force is descriptive of the experiences of many combat athletes from various disciplines. Not unlike the Olympic runner pursuing the pleasure of God on the boxer seeking transcendence in a regulated fight, most all forms of Japanese arts teach the deeper and more mystic intent of the discipline being learned. Most notable is Japanese archery, which is not,

practiced solely for hitting the target; the swordsman does not wield the sword just for the sake of outdoing his opponent; the dancer does not dance just to perform certain rhythmic movements of the body. The mind has first to be attuned to the Unconscious.¹⁴

Describing the significance behind *yawatashi*, a sacred Japanese archery ritual, Einat Bar-On Cohen writes,

Japanese religions are not situated on a meta-level in relation to practice; rather, like martial arts, they come to be through practice alone, and thus ... practice and habitus become inseparable through it.¹⁵

In the non-dualist Japanese mind, martial arts represent not a sport but a form of spirituality placed in a system of practices and traditions. Whether one is using a sword or a bow and arrow, these instruments are mere extensions of the ultimate uniformity that the athlete is working daily to achieve. The goal is a wholeness of spirit and body in seamless expression, described by Eugen Herrigel as “artless art.”¹⁶ His classic work, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, captures in detail his experience of learning Zen through Japanese archery over a span of six years. To the Western mind, the German professor of philosophy’s personal account of immersion in Zen provides a provocative paradigm for seeing spirituality and sport as an inseparable singular force of life.

Pursuing Transcendence

No other sport puts a person so directly in the face of their deepest fears than combat. To some degree, all people risk career, finance, physical health, relationships, and reputation in pursuit of meaning, but outside of combat sports, very few activities re-

For his ethnographic study, sociologist Tomonori Ishioka committed himself to a boxing gym for one year as both a researcher and trainee. According to Ishioka, “Heart is the metaphorical womb which gives birth to the attitude that enables you to keep facing down your opponent without letting on how much fear or pain you might be feeling.”¹⁷ He describes a common gesture in tryouts and sparring sessions where a boxer tells another fighter, “He’s weak here, as they move their palm on the left side of their chest—the heart.”¹⁸ For former professional super-middle weight boxing champ Chris Eubank, the boxer is a warrior who exists to demonstrate the superiority of what is possible with God’s creation. This superiority is available to all; it is the supremacy of the spirit ruling the basest instincts.¹⁹ Joyce Carol Oates further observes that,

The boxer must somehow learn, by what effort of will non-boxers surely cannot guess, to inhibit his own instinct for survival he must learn to exert his ‘will’ over his merely human and animal impulses, not only to flee pain but to flee the unknown.²⁰

Combat sports are not unique. Rather, they’re distinguished in the way they confront the tension of a person’s fears and hopes with unparalleled candor and physicality. In combat sports, like war, the athlete’s entire life is committed to the goals of training and competition. As Eubank once said, “in the

plex, transcendence is at the heart of meaning making just as it is in all of the major religions. Religions provide a way of framing suffering, injustice, and brokenness in the world through transcendent beliefs. Whether it is the hope of eternal rewards, the attainment of *nirvana*, or ultimate oneness with the universe, their essential teachings provide ways of instilling meaning, and thereby hope, in people. In addition to their imaginative and faith-oriented qualities, the major religions deal extensively with instructions on morality. They all contain some ideal that may be described as good, righteous, or compassionate. Contrary to the violence combat sports exhibits on television, the faithful practitioners of combat sports often gain greater self-discipline and learn to regulate emotions in the most hostile situations.

A Way to Moral Progress

In the Far East, martial arts have been historically perceived as an effective discipline for promoting physical health, moral education, self-respect, and as a reducer of social brutality.²² One writer suggests that the boxing gym and aikido dojo can be conceived as kind of “civilizing workshops” where greater control and detachment from violence is acquired.²³ Coincidentally, it is not uncommon that those coming to train in combat sports often come from troubled pasts plagued by poverty, violence, abuse, low self-esteem, weight issues, bullying, and so forth. It is no surprise then that the boxing and martial art gyms in the ethnographic studies covered in this article were all located in poor inner cities rather than middle-upper class suburbs. On the other side of their shadows, these eager trainees bring with them a desire for significance, to be a part of something larger than the ego, and the experience of breaking out of one’s previously known human patterns and limits. In a sense, one trains in combat sports to become a superior version of self.

In a sparring session a fighter must remain calm, calculate what course of

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quires the risk of almost all of the above simultaneously. To overcome such fears that combat represents, and those predicated upon people’s perceptions, winning and losing, the risk of power gain and loss, economic factors, and so on, is to become transcendent. To some boxers in the Philippines, the secret to transcendence is having “heart.”

ring there is honesty,” and in respect to his most difficult fights, where he stayed in the match through fatigue and injury, “my ancestors were in this punch, everything ... everything was in this punch.”²¹

While the narratives of why these athletes devote the prime of their lives to combat sports are diverse and com-

action to take next, and inspire himself to do it ... The looks, jeers and laughter of the spectators are a collective act intended to make the tryout student lose his cool.²⁴

But trainers and coaches know that what happens in the ring is simply a reflection of what is happening in one's personal life. The best coaches, therefore, demand a lifestyle commitment for anyone desiring to make combat sports a priority pursuit.²⁵ "Trainers take seriously the idea of individuality and hold close the notion that 'anyone can do it.' Trainers often connect experiences in the ring with life outside it."²⁶

In the case of Japanese fencing, the way of the Samurai, one master asks,

How does skill become 'spiritual,' and how does sovereign control of technique turn into master swordplay? Only, so we are informed, by the pupil's becoming purposeless and egoless. He must be taught to be detached not only from his opponent but from himself.²⁷

Humility with a view toward self-mastery are the two hallmarks of most, if not all, combat sport philosophies. With enough humility and desire, all the other obstacles—including immoral patterns learned previously—can be overcome. Hence, it is safe to say that the arrogant showman athlete we occasionally see in the media is a commercialized aberration of what each discipline actually values and instills in its athletes. If anyone wants to become a master, "He must become a pupil again, a beginner."²⁸

In terms of moral progress, we see that combat sports do not provide much moral latitude if preparation and progress are the goals of an athlete. While a religious person can easily give mental assent to the beliefs of Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism without ever applying the dogmas of their faith to everyday decisions, the desire to be a world champion in boxing or a grandmaster in martial arts will not produce any tangible results without the grueling work ethic required. A combat athlete is kept honest and his progress is always accounted for. He must train mentally, physically, and spiritually if his commitment is ever

going to materialize in a meaningful way. The truth will come out in the sparring and in competition. Success in the combat sports requires a kind of immersion of the entire person. It also may be the very thing that draws certain unlikely people to pursue it. Eric Greitens, a former Navy Seal and Rhodes Scholar, is one of these atypical men who pursued boxing while earning his doctorate at Oxford because he learned that compassion was not enough to change the world. He writes:

I've been blessed to work with volunteers who taught art to street children in Bolivia and Marines who hunted al Qaeda terrorists in Iraq. I've learned from nuns who fed the destitute in Mother Teresa's homes for the dying in India, aid workers who healed orphaned children in Rwanda, and Navy SEALs who fought in Afghanistan. As warriors, as humanitarians, they've taught me that without courage, compassion falters, and that without compassion, courage has no direction. They've shown me that it is within our power, and that the world requires of us—of every one of us—that we be both good and strong.²⁹

Greitens credits his early days of learning boxing from a small gym in North Carolina while an undergraduate at Duke University as one of the most formative years of his life. He writes of his former coach,

For Earl, the gym, or the parking lot, or the patch of mud behind North Carolina Central University where we would sometimes train—any location where men came to make themselves better—was his place of worship, and the tasks of boxing were his rituals.³⁰

Perhaps more than any other benefit, the development of the courage—the courage to be moral, the courage to overcome pain, and the courage to face one's deepest fears—is what makes combat sports a compelling, deeply spiritual practice for many people.

Hooked on Flow

At the University of Chicago, Mihaly

Csikszentmihalyi began his study of flow in the 1970s with an interest in capturing the recipe for optimal human functioning. Flow is now mainstream and has been incorporated into diverse fields of education and consulting. Specifically, for athletes, flow is

... full engagement in their athletic performance that involves an ideal balance among focus, enjoyment, the challenges of the competitive situation, and the athlete's skills.³¹

Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement."³² A desire to achieve flow is found in many sports, art, and any activity that allows for creative solutions to challenges. Not unlike skydiving, surfing, and other sports that require the highest level of mind and body concentration, combat sport athletes continually train to be fully present in the moment since timing, muscle reaction, emotional flexibility, and movement effect the performance outcome, sometimes instantly.

Flow, like transcendence and morality, cannot be explained as simply a cognitive or physiological experience. It is the engagement of the entire person as a thinking, acting, and meaning-making whole. Perhaps the experience of holistic unity, by way of devotion to a discipline, is the secret appeal. Combat sports offer the possibility of being and acting who we want to be in seemingly automatic, correct, and autotelic fashion, which can be a compelling desire for a people living lives that are more fragmented than all previous generations.

Implications for Leadership

John Morgan, a sophisticated philosopher and pioneer in the death and spirituality movement, wrote of our need to find meaning:

Human spirituality is to seek an answer to the question 'How can you make sense out of a world which does not seem to be intrinsically reasonable?' And so, this ability of persons to self-determine his or her life, is perhaps the most fundamental example of the spiritual nature of the person.³³

For Morgan, the core of the person is spirituality, and it cannot be escaped.

Studies in spirituality range from debates over whether it is secular or religious, individualistic or communal, and over what the term means and where it should be applied.³⁴ Some see the popularity of spirituality practices beyond organized religion as a threat to orthodoxy while others see it as a long-awaited liberation. Bregman is certainly in the latter category, as she argues that,

We are, as we have always been, beings who want to make claims about what is ultimate and meaningful, but we can no longer automatically use older languages to anchor such claims. Religious language has faded, and some of its substitutes, particularly the language of psychology, have lost a lot of their allure and prestige. Spirituality as a concept carries with it stories of disillusion, as well as hope. If we fail to understand these ambivalences, we will not only waste our own time, but we will bequeath to the next generations a legacy of mush and confusion, an unhelpful dead-end approach to solving long-standing problems they too will face.³⁵

Bregman considers herself among the 14 percent who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” and she envisions a future where this group will eventually be the majority. For many committed to combat sports, spirituality can be as rewarding as religion, if not more so.

Spirituality, as a way to pursue transcendence, moral progress, and flow, can be useful ways to better understand why we do the things we do. It is not simply enough to teach people to be ethical. All human beings are fallible. Behaviors can be manipulated and managed, to some degree. But when speaking to a person’s spirituality, the relationship can be transformational and life changing. To go beyond management we must go beyond ethics. To lead and inspire, we step into the mysterious and deep waters of beliefs, values, hopes, fears, and dreams. When a person truly believes that all people are worthy of respect and kindness, they don’t need a course in customer service practices. Likewise, if leadership supports both the spiritual ideas and practices that foster loyalty



Spiritual fitness is critical to mission readiness. (Photo by LCpl Toiyee Matally.)

and sacrifice, the sexual assault and divisiveness among the unit will also drop. Much of this is obviously easier said than done. And leadership is an art as well as a science. There needs to be a spirit of embracing creative failure coupled with the humility and open mindedness to see it as a communal experience.

Spirituality is an ever-growing concept ...

While there are many ways to pursue transcendence, moral progress, or flow, military leaders have many ways to create the conditions necessary to pursue such spiritual desires. But the practice must be linked to the ideas behind them in order to give greater meaning to the activity. Combat sports without any other intent than to simply watch another person suffer is inhumane and, by most definitions, a sign of some social pathology. But the higher desires awakened by the spiritual core of a person dramatically reshapes the event into an activity of mutual growth and human connection. While every leader will face this initiative in a different context, unless we become more comfortable discussing and engaging spirituality as

a real and universal human quality, we will only resort to the same practices from yesterday.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 033/16, Spiritual Fitness*, (Washington, DC: October 2016).
2. Cezary Kusnierz, “Motivations for Starting Combat Sports Training as Seen by Boxing and MMA Contestants,” *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiáticas*, (Online: September 2016).
3. Lucy Bregman, *The Ecology of Spirituality: Meanings, Virtues, and Practices in a Post-Religious Age*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), available at <http://site.ebrary.com>.
4. Ibid.
5. Stephen Costello, “The Spirit of Logotherapy,” *Religions*, (Online: December 2015), available at www.mdpi.com.
6. The inclusion of spiritual categories in therapeutic models in healthcare serve as a good introduction to a growing body of publications arguing for a more holistic understanding of human flourishing. See Harold G. Koenig, “Religion and Mental Health: What Should Psychiatrists Do?,” *Psychiatric Bulletin*, (Online: 30 May 2008), and David Larson, Harold Koenig, and Michael McCullough, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

7. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984).

8. Watson argues that identity in sport is diametrically opposed to the one espoused by Christians since the former is rooted in humanism and the latter in God. Nick Watson, "Theological and Psychological Reflections on Identity in Sport," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, July 2011).

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13. Dale C. Spencer and Raúl Sánchez García, *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports*, (London: Anthem Press, 2013).

14. Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, (New York: Random House, 1981).

15. *Fighting Scholars*.

16. *Zen in the Art of Archery*.

17. Tomonori Ishioka, "How Can One Be a Boxer?: Pain and Pleasure in a Manila's Boxing Camp," *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., March 2015).

18. Ibid.

19. Chris Eubank—English, accessed 7 December 2016, available at <https://londonreal.tv/chris-eubank-english>.

20. Lucia Trimbur, "'Tough Love': Mediation and Articulation in the Urban Boxing Gym," *Ethnography*, (September 2011).

21. Chris Eubank—English.

22. "Motivations for Starting Combat Sports Training as Seen by Boxing and MMA Contestants."

23. *Fighting Scholars*.

24. "How Can One Be a Boxer."

25. "Tough Love."

26. Ibid.

27. Tomonori Ishioka, "How Can One Be a Boxer?: Pain and Pleasure in a Manila's Boxing Camp," *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., March 2015).

28. Ibid.

29. Eric Greitens, *The Heart and the Fist: The Education of a Humanitarian, the Making of a Navy SEAL*, (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2012).

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31. Leeja Carter, Beau River, and Michael L. Sachs, "Flow in Sport, Exercise, and Performance: A Review with Implications for Future Research," *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, (Online: 2013).

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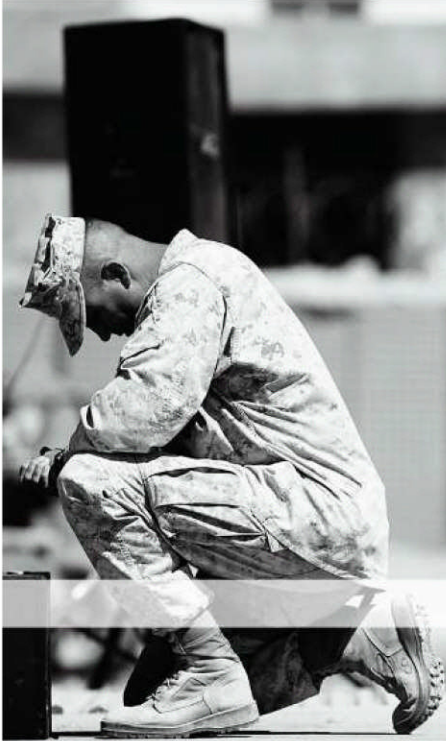
34. Ibid.

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