Athletic Leadership and Chronically Anxious America

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Abstract

We are fast becoming (or perhaps already have become) a society that to its detriment values security over risk and safety over adventure. As such, we consistently sacrifice opportunities to grow through challenge. Perhaps the most unfortunate consequence of this orientation toward safety is that our nation, now more than ever, lacks leaders of character. Consequently, America is faced with what I believe to be the defining problem of our time. We need a way to develop leaders who can forge ahead with self-control and moral clarity in the midst of growing uncertainty. Thankfully, while it may appear there are fewer and fewer places that are developing such leaders, I do not believe we are without hope.

I believe one answer can be found in the carefully constructed, highly competitive athletic environment. Such environments represent one of the few remaining cultural strongholds for leadership and character development in twenty-first-century America. On the outset, one must understand I am talking about an environment that is completely antithetical to those that produce and encourage the shocking antics of the latest ESPN prima donna. Instead, this article will argue for the idea that the carefully constructed, highly competitive athletic environment, infused with intentional and relentless coaching focused on developing Christ-like people, will result in the production of well-differentiated leaders who can revive America. Products of such environments are not reactive, do not blame others for their failures, and are not afraid to take stands in the face of pressure. In addition, in order to “survive,” they must wholeheartedly embrace a belief that short-term pain is necessary for long-term gain and are willing to live out that belief. In short, such leaders have “nerve” enough to lead.
Introduction

America is self-destructing. According to Jim Nelson Black (1994), author of *When nations die: America on the brink: Ten warning signs of a culture in crisis*, our nation is going the way of many of the great empires of millenniums past whose social, cultural, and moral decay marked the end of their prominence. Black (1994) lists 10 characteristics of our nation that indicate we are following their lead: a crisis of lawlessness, a loss of economic discipline, a rising bureaucracy, a decline in education, a weakening of cultural foundations, a loss of respect for tradition, an increase in materialism, the rise of immorality, the decay of religious belief, and a devaluing of human life (p. xviii).

According to Black (1994), “In the great empires of history we see a picture of our own world; and in the fatal decisions that have lead time after time to catastrophe, we have a stark warning of the consequences of cultural and moral decay” (p. 4). A common quick-fix approach employed by many of our nation’s leaders, be they absentee fathers or senators, has been to throw money at the problem. Consider the following statistics Black (1994) recounts from a survey done in 1993 by the Heritage Foundation and Empower America regarding governmental attempts to stem the tide of decay.

Between 1960 and 1993, where total government spending increased from $142 billion to $787 billion: America experienced a quadrupling of divorce rates, a 200% increase in teenage suicide, and a 75 point drop in average SAT Scores. In addition, the number of children in single parent homes increased threefold. (Black, 1994, p. 6)

As David Barton reports, “Total pregnancies for unwed girls between 15 and 19 soared from 100,000 in 1963 to 650,000 in 1987. Premarital sex among teenage girls has jumped from 23% to 70%, and incidents of violent crime leapt from 250,000 in 1962 to 1.7 million in 1990” (Black, 1994, p. 87).

As it relates to our current predicament, the French Revolutionary Alexis de Tocqueville appears prophetic. He observed that “…the rise of the all-powerful state is the root of the waves of egoism, selfishness, and self-seeking that perennially overcome great societies at critical times in history” (Black, 1994, p. 69). As Michael Leahy’s research indicates, the U.S. is now the world’s largest exporter and the world’s fourth largest consumer of pornography, an industry that is nothing if not insidiously indulgent and self-centered (Salon, 2013).

While an argument can be made regarding the dangers inherent to massive and overly powerful governments, that is not our purpose here. America’s attempts to right the ship through increasing bureaucracy are mentioned here only inasmuch as they represent one of the many ways her leaders have been ineffective. Instead, our purpose is to provide a different way forward. To do that means looking at our problems, our solutions, and our leadership differently. To that end I turn to Edwin Friedman.
Before his passing in 1996, Friedman was a former Rabbi, a consultant for many decades to churches, synagogues, business organizations, and government agencies including the United States Army’s General Staff in Europe, a member of Johnson’s White House Administration, a marriage and family therapist in the greater Metropolitan D.C. area for over 40 years, and author of a number of books including *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (1999, 2007). Given his extensive experience in the three non-medical “help” sectors of our society (government, religion, clinical counseling) and birthed from his studies in Family Systems Therapy pioneered by Dr. Murray Bowen of Georgetown Medical School, Friedman (1999, 2007) developed a convincing argument regarding America’s current situation. He argued that America’s leadership problems are emotional and systemic in nature (Friedman, 1999, 2007, p. 61). Put simply, contemporary American institutions are exhibiting the identical symptoms of a chronically anxious family (Friedman, 1999, 2007, p. 61).

He believed that our businesses, governments, churches, and families are tainted by the presence of reactivity, a herding for togetherness, blame displacement, and quick-fix solutions to problems. These symptoms lead to and are perpetuated by a failure of nerve in leadership (Friedman, 1999, 2007, pp. 55-58, 61). This “condition” has significantly handicapped, and in many cases eliminated, the leadership abilities of otherwise strong and courageous men and women. The handicapping is so debilitating as to prohibit the very people who could lead us in a new direction from doing so. Nevertheless, America finds itself in need of what Friedman (1999, 2007) calls “well differentiated” leaders, willing to stand tall in the face of “the raging anxiety storms of our times” (p. 14).

It is my contention, and the thesis of this article, that one answer to our leadership problem can be found in carefully constructed highly competitive athletic environments focused on pursuing Christ-likeness.1 Embedded in such environments are not only challenges that allow for growth, but also transferable life lessons waiting to be seized. These challenges and life lessons, if understood rightly and coached through intentionally, allow the athlete the opportunity to mature not only into the type of person who can slow America’s decline, but also, and more importantly, into a virtuous person resembling Jesus Christ. For, assuming a relatively equal level of tactical and technical proficiency in comparison to an athlete’s opponent, the vast majority of the necessary characteristics for

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1The view expressed in this article is a response to Friedman’s thesis in *A Failure of Nerve*. Assuming Friedman’s assessments are accurate, this article aims to demonstrate one way to solve the specific leadership problems America is facing which in turn will help us slow and perhaps reverse the social, cultural, and moral decay in our nation that both he and Jim Nelson Black argue for. It is this author’s belief that a personal and transformative relationship with Jesus Christ, and not simply the mimicking of Jesus’ leadership traits, is the long-lasting solution not only to America’s leadership problems but also to the universal problems of human existence. However, embracing this point of view specifically is not necessary in order for America’s leaders to benefit from the solution I propose to their leadership obstacles.
an athlete’s success on the pitch are the very things that Jesus taught and modeled. These virtues are the characteristics of respected and proven leaders throughout history.

As anyone knows who has competed athletically at a high level, there is a relentless and brutal honesty to the athletic process. Accountability and personal responsibility aren’t simply catchphrases; they are the difference between life and death (winning and losing) in the world of sport. Consequently, such an environment is ripe for developing leaders of a specific ilk; leaders who are on the one hand sacrificial and humble and on the other hand tough enough (mentally and emotionally) to lead.

The remainder of this article, therefore, will do four things. First, it will briefly explain the societal regression for which Friedman (1999, 2007) argues, which in turn highlights the need for leaders of a specific kind to handle such regression. Second, it will demonstrate how Jesus Christ (and those who model his leadership example) is exactly the type of leader necessary to combat the regression of our time. Third, it will describe the nature of the carefully constructed, highly competitive environment. Fourth and concurrent with the third objective, it will describe how such an environment encourages the maturing and revealing of Christ-like leadership in its participants, and therefore provides a solution for our leadership void.

Chronic Anxiety and Friedman’s Regressed America

According to Friedman (1999, 2007), “Chronic anxiety might be compared to the volatile atmosphere of a room filled with gas fumes, where any sparking incident could set off a conflagration, and where people would then blame the person who struck the match rather than trying to disperse the fumes” (p. 58). Simply put, our country is perpetually on edge. As such, when problems arise, it is bent toward overreaction and blame instead of toward problem solving. These tendencies seem present anywhere there are organized people, regardless of their gender, race, culture, or age (Friedman, 1999, 2007, pp. 65-66).

The characteristics referred to are the virtues this author has seen first-hand in over 18 years of playing and coaching intercollegiate athletics while winning championships as a player and a coach and also enduring losing seasons. In addition, they are the characteristics he witnessed in other championship teams as well at all levels of athletics and are corroborated by reading most anything by John Wooden and other coaching legends. These virtues include selflessness, perseverance, resolve, mental toughness, sacrifice, an attention to detail, and an ability to navigate successfully through the forces for individuality and togetherness inherent in life.

It is fascinating to find that when on the playing field, championship teams consistently and necessarily demonstrate the same virtues of selflessness, sacrifice, perseverance, resolve, attention to detail, etc., that Jesus himself taught and modeled. It is at least part of what makes them champions. Jim Collins, author of Built to last, Good to great, How the mighty fall, and Great by choice makes a similar point when examining the characteristics of great CEOs. His research indicated most of the elite CEOs possessed an unassuming, hard-working, and humble posture.
Consequently, our society is bent toward reactivity (typified by automatic responses), a herding instinct (where togetherness is the supreme value of a community and as such necessarily stamps out individuality), blame displacement (exemplified by an erosion of integrity and personal responsibility), and a quick-fix mentality (demonstrated by a very low threshold for pain) (Friedman, 1999, 2007, pp. 53-54). To say that such an atmosphere is detrimental for leadership is an understatement. According to Friedman (1999, 2007), when “well-differentiated” leaders (those who take personal responsibility for their emotional being and presence) step up and lead, the chronically anxious society/family, because of its regressed state, will sabotage them (p. 11). This has been at times my own experience, and is very often the experience of leaders from coast to coast.

Perhaps we should put this in terms we can easily understand. Friedman’s (1999, 2007) contention is that our nation resembles a family whose father is a substance abuser. Returning from a binge, and due to his own lack of self-control, the father abuses his wife yet again. The oldest son, weary of his father’s consistently invasive and abusive behavior and the subsequent toll it takes on his family, calls the authorities. Upon doing so, and because he takes an individual stand that sacrifices “togetherness” (regardless of how unhealthy and dangerous their togetherness is), he is attacked and marginalized by his siblings and mother for “destroying the family”. Never mind the fact that the father is already doing exactly that.

The rest of the family, caught in the regression, elevating togetherness as the supreme virtue and searching for a quick fix to the problem, will look for a way to silence the son. They consistently and to their detriment believe that each incident represents an anomaly and as such requires no significant response. Consequently, the most mature among them is sabotaged, and the family, for the sake of togetherness, (regardless of how unhealthy and dangerous their togetherness is), caters to the most immature and least self-regulated person among them. In this family, as so often is the case in our nation, emotionally immature followers set the agenda. The leader/son, after consistently being overcome by the family’s unhealthy and skewed emphasis on togetherness, eventually loses nerve or resigns from taking further stands.

Athletic Environments, the Life of Jesus Christ, and Chronic Anxiety

It is difficult to imagine a consistently successful athletic program where the least regulated and most immature member is able to get away with such behavior. After being involved in athletics for the better part of 35 years, I do not think it exists. When you combine the public nature of athletic success and failure (where coaches, teammates, and fans are always watching) with the competitive nature of athletics, every competitor is quickly exposed for what they really are. There is no hiding. And blame for failure in such an environment, while sometimes attempted, is easily defeated for the scoreboard does not lie.
If such an environment is combined with a coach who is even the slightest bit interested in the positive development of people by holding the athlete accountable, then the possibility of allowing such immaturity becomes less and less. If a coach is intently focused on connecting the development of his/her athletes with the character traits of Jesus Christ, then it is all but impossible to cater to the least regulated teammate. Put a different way, a zero toleration policy for such immaturity results in its demise.

The chart below reveals the glaring dichotomy between the characteristics of the life of Jesus Christ and those of the chronically anxious society/institution/family. Keep in mind that the chronically anxious society/institution/family, by its very nature, produces and encourages immaturity within its membership. It stands to reason, therefore, that if we can produce environments specifically targeted at and uncompromising in their infusion of Christlikeness, then we will produce leaders who by their very nature will defuse the regressive effects of our country’s chronic anxiety.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of the life of Jesus Christ</th>
<th>Characteristics of a chronically anxious society/institution/family</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>·A lack of anxiety in the presence of difficulty, steadfast and patient commitment to larger objectives, and personal responsibility in the face of adversity (Matthew 26 and 27, NIV)</td>
<td>Reactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>·A willingness to go it alone. An ability to separate while remaining connected. A refusal to compromise the sacrificial mission at hand by conforming to the consensus of what others (even those relationally close and “on his side”) believe, think, or do (Mark 2, Matthew 16:21-24, NIV)</td>
<td>Herding for togetherness</td>
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### Characteristics of the life of Jesus Christ

- A disciplined self-focus (Friedman, 1999, 2007, pp. 165-186) and a focus on the mission at hand regardless of mounting obstacles (John 14:31, NIV)
- A peculiar self-restraint to avoid the blame of others rooted in his relationship with God the father prohibited him from blame when he was betrayed (Matthew 26:50-52, NIV)
- A consistent belief in a higher purpose beyond the immediate difficulty (John 19:11, NIV)
- A non-anxious posture even in the midst of situations that appear to be out of one's own control (John 5:19, NIV)

### Characteristics of a chronically anxious society/institution/family

- Blame displacement
- Quick-fix solutions
- Failure of nerve in leaders

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1It should be noted that the word “self” will most likely be interpreted with a negative connotation. Indeed to refer to Jesus Christ as being focused on “self” seems contrary to what most would understand of Him as revealed in the Biblical record. Time doesn’t permit a deep exploration into the etymology of “self” (see Friedman, 1999, 2007, pp. 165-186 for further information regarding “self”). Nevertheless, if one can put aside the immediate negative connotations that arise with the word “self” (something that is admittedly difficult for Americans to do if Friedman’s assessment is accurate) and appropriately think of “self” as innocuous and potentially even good, the reader will be better served.

Further, in the spirit of Friedman, I submit that the “self” focus Jesus demonstrated is not “selfishness.” Rather, it was an ability to mitigate the anxieties around him by being in total control of his responses and by his refusing to compromise his mission at hand (which, ironically, involved the greatest degree of self-sacrifice ever demonstrated). The point, of course, is that I do not believe Jesus was “selfish.” Instead I would argue that he was simply the master at understanding where he ended and where others begin and he never let those lines become blurred. In addition, he was unafraid of doing those things which were necessary for his own health and mission (Mark 1:35), despite pressure from others. The net result, of course, is that his refusal to cater to the demands of others (be they from his adversaries who incessantly demanded proof of his claims to Deity, or from his short-sighted disciples who jockeyed for power in his kingdom to come) was and is a demonstration of the healthiest form of leadership.
Characteristics of the Carefully Constructed Highly Competitive Athletic Environment

Now that we have an understanding of the difference between Jesus Christ and those who are products of chronically anxious institutions, for the purposes of this article, it is necessary to examine the carefully constructed, highly competitive athletic environment and how it impacts its participants. The net result, as has been argued, is that a participant who has come through such an environment is one who will be more Christ-like, and capable of leading America forward. Strewn throughout the following pages will be anecdotal examples from my own 18 years of experience as an intercollegiate athlete and coach in two sports.²

The Veneration of Self-Regulation and Discipline

Inherent in the athletic process is the need for self-control and discipline. If an athlete is to succeed (win a match, earn a starting role, gain playing time, etc. – things every athlete desires) he/she must consistently and continually deny themselves anything from simple pleasures (like eating certain foods) to their own physical comfort as they endure the painstaking processes of conditioning and strength training. After some time engaging in this day-in day-out process, and because they need to “survive,” athletes find themselves increasingly self-controlled and disciplined, whether or not they have a coach who cares about their development.

When a coach who is intent on shaping the character of his/her athletes by connecting the process with Christ-likeness is added to this process, the virtue-producing nature of the process is only enhanced. One of the strategies for achieving our team’s mission is to pursue excellence with everything we have. Excellence, as we have defined it, is synonymous with Christ-likeness. In particular, we have connected the discipline and self-control necessary in successful athletics with what is necessary to succeed in marriage and in the workplace and it is a message we consistently preach. My current players consistently joke with me about the incessant push toward excellence in this fashion. Their “making fun,” in addition to messages I receive from alums, demonstrate that the message is being heard and implemented. One former player who now coaches at another university has used our mission statement focused on Christ-likeness with his program. So too has another graduate who now coaches high school basketball. In addition, a very good former player wrote to me that the emphasis on excellence has helped him as he transitioned from university life to the workforce and to life with his new bride. Our mission statement has even made its way into a Bible class at the university in which I coach.

²Here I am assuming that optimal experiential learning that comes from being immersed in any learning environment is improved by stepping back and analyzing what has just been experienced. According to Roger C. Schank, the director of the Institute for the Learning Sciences as Northwestern University, in order for students to avoid forgetting what they have learned (or in our case, forgetting the experience they have just experienced), they must understand why they should care about knowing it (or, again, in our case, why they should care about experiencing it). The coach’s job is to help the athlete connect the dots.
Leaders who Lead by Focusing on Their Own Presence and Performance

The nature of highly competitive athletics demands individuals take care of themselves in order to fit in well with the team. No teammate, however “team” oriented they may be, can help the team be successful unless they do their job, and do it well. It is in some ways like the passenger who is going down in a plane who needs to put on his oxygen mask first. Once he is able to breathe, he can help others with their masks. In other ways, however, it is much more than that. Those leaders who take care to do their jobs extremely well create a progressing vacuum of sorts. This forging ahead “sucks” people along in its wake, enabling those followers to rise up and perform at levels that heretofore had not been achieved. The presence of leaders who do not take care to do their jobs well results in teams that are “going nowhere” as there is no wake where there is no moving ahead. Put differently, if leaders aren’t going anywhere, neither are their followers.

Jesus seemed to move in such ways. Consider how he seemed to disappear from even those who needed healing and teaching as recorded in the opening chapter of the gospel of Mark. When confronted by his disciples about the crowds needing him, he insisted on going elsewhere! Focused on obedience to God and on his mission at hand, Jesus turned away “worthy” activities in order to remain steadfast to the mission for which he was called.

In addition, he did unconventional things that captured the imagination of his followers. He taught and modeled counterintuitive and countercultural things as he carved out new territory. Consider his elevation of women as an example. Those who were pulled along in the wake of this “trailblazing,” like the apostles Peter and Paul, were completely and utterly transformed. Their metamorphosis was so significant as to move them to the point where they would die for the cause.

This has been an important connection our coaching staff has made of late with our players. Interestingly, when our team leaders (typically captains and upperclassmen) have been “self” focused (again, not “selfish” but rather taking care to do their jobs well and holding tight to the mission at hand), our staff has noticed that they have become better performers and lead more successful ventures. Those around them seem to elevate their own performances. On the other hand, those leaders of ours who:

- worried too much about what others were doing or thinking, or
- were not balanced or stable enough to take care of themselves, or
- were too often distracted with “life” in the midst of their athletic pursuits, and who had thereby forgotten the importance of their own individual performance and improvement, had been leaders of teams that in large part have underachieved. As we have better understood this apparently
counterintuitive truth, we have asked our players to hold in tension the idea that they need to be “self” focused without ignoring the biblical admonitions to be servants to one another.

Accountability and Personal Responsibility

Athletics by its objective nature (where there are those who make the team and those who are cut, those who are starters and those who are nonstarters, those who are winners and those who are losers, etc.) requires that athletes are both accountable and responsible for their behavior. If an athlete doesn’t train continually and strenuously, the game has a way of revealing it, regardless of whether a coach takes appropriate stands to marginalize the athlete who isn’t pulling his or her weight. Put another way, if you don’t do what it takes to stay relevant, you will be cut, benched, lose, etc.

This process is further enhanced to the degree that a coach is willing to put in place structures where hard work and good performance are rewarded and where laziness and lack of discipline receive their just compensation. An athlete who fails to do their job has no one to blame but themselves and the public nature of sport allows everyone to see it. If a coach is present who cares about the development of his/her athlete as a person, the immediate difficulty surrounding the embarrassment and short-term failure can be a springboard for future development and it is the coach’s job to ensure this happens. This brings us to our fourth characteristic.

Short-Term Pain for Long-Term Gain

One of the most necessary truths those in the athletic process must come to understand and embrace is the idea of short-term pain for long-term gain. It is foundational to success. It is the understanding that one has to go through something hard before something good can result. In the athletic process, this happens at the micro level with individual performance and at the macro level with wins and losses. Players must sort out their own performances, learning from their mistakes, in order to do better next time. Off-season workouts require that an athlete grind it out when no one is looking so that they are prepared for when it matters. Teams must do the same thing, learning from their experience in order to win future contests. Simply put, if success is to happen, it will cost you something.

This principle of short-term pain for long-term gain is an intellectual feeding ground of teachable material for any coach. Interestingly, Jesus predicted his own death in John 12:24 by appealing to this principle. We see this almost-universal principle in everything from farming to weightlifting, from athletic conditioning to starting a new business. In some sense, short-term pain for long-term gain is what raising a family, getting a job, and success in all areas of life is all about. The ability to navigate through this truth and its future applicability with the help of someone who is further ahead in life means that athletes will be better prepared for what awaits them in the world to come.
Leaders with Nerve/Christ-Like Leaders

The net result of a person who has gone through the athletic process where excellence as we have defined it is pursued and achieved is significant. He/she will be a person who is more self-controlled, more self-disciplined, more in charge of their emotional presence, more accountable for their actions, more personally responsible, and more likely to embrace the principle of short-term pain for long-term gain. In short, he/she will be a leader who has nerve enough to lead.

Conclusion

It has been my thesis that our country is regressing. In agreement with Friedman (1999, 2007), this emotional devolution, caused by a chronic anxiety in our culture, has itself caused a crisis in leadership today as our institutions (families, governments, and corporations) caught in the regression sabotage those who would be able to move the institutions forward. The net result is a society on edge where leaders with character, self-regulation, and nerve are either reluctant to take stands or are weary from continually doing so.

It has been my contention that a solution for our leadership vacuum can be found in the carefully constructed, highly competitive athletic environment of a specific sort. Such an environment is doubly strong. The nature of highly competitive athletics lends itself to the development of people who can be told the truth about their behavior, who understand that truth for what it is, and are willing to go through whatever short-term pain is necessary to correct their behavior. When this environment is infused with a pursuit of being like Jesus Christ, then this one-two punch is extremely impactful and results in the production of leaders who can save us from the regression. For the leadership practices demonstrated by Jesus (and by this I mean the way in which he carried himself and remained focused on his mission at hand) provide a roadmap for our nation’s ability to right the ship.

To this I add two points. First, there is no doubt that in many areas of our culture, and specifically in the world of higher education, the tail is wagging the dog. Education too often finds itself beholden to sport. My hope is that given the aforementioned arguments and despite that predicament, educators across the board would see the benefit of the educational experience found in the carefully constructed, highly competitive athletic environment for which I argue. I would hope that they would realize that athletic development can be every bit as “educational” as the classroom.

Second, I want to address what many may have concluded at one point or another in the aforementioned pages. The leaders of such environments must themselves be the types of leaders that I have argued the environments themselves produce. The highly competitive athletic environment is powerful enough to develop some of the skills necessary for well-differentiated leadership as has been argued for, but it’s not complete. Since the environment itself is an organized group of people, it means it is subject to the growth.
same regressive effects of any other group in our culture, albeit to a lesser degree I would argue because of the nature of athletics.

In other words, while scoreboards do hold athletes accountable to a certain degree, a coach who refuses to let strong personalities, immature troublemakers, and the “uncoachable” set the agenda is one who, all being things equal, will be successful. This success is made manifest not only in the short-term wins that come on the field as I have been fortunate enough to experience, but also in the long-term wins that come from creating his/her part of a generation of self-controlled, self-regulated, and mature future parents and community leaders who refuse to succumb to the pressing need for consensus good feelings and short-term fixes that seem to have hijacked our nation.

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References