

Death in the afternoon

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In the days and weeks and months that follow the tragic shootings on the Virginia Tech campus earlier this month, public attention and debate will continue to focus on the endless issues such a massive tragedy spawns.

Gun regulations, the response of the police force, breakdowns in the treatment of the psychologically unbalanced, campus security, the propriety of the media exercising their constitutional freedom without consideration of sensibilities or consequences – all have been and will be discussed endlessly. As they should be.

But while others are gathering facts and affixing blame and rushing to judgment, I would urge everyone to take one simple lesson from this tragedy. One solid truth to live and die by whatever you face in life.

Liviu Librescu.

It's a Romanian name, one most of us never heard before this month, but one we should never forget.

He was born in Romania, buried in Israel, and both countries blessed him with their highest honors after his passing in America. He was an engineering professor who lectured on the stress levels of aeronautic materials, but he never taught a greater lesson than the last silent one he delivered on the mettle of the human soul. He lived because he stubbornly survived the slaughter of the Holocaust, but he should be remembered in all of our lives because he bravely died in the massacre in Virginia.

What, you may ask, does this have to do with sports, and what, more specifically you may ask, does this have to do with LGBT sports? You may as well ask what sports have to do with life and specifically what sports means to queers like us.

For participants, sports appeal to three basic components of our hearts: ego, excellence and enjoyment. We usually play sports because they promote our sense of achievement, they give us the opportunity to win the respect and admiration of others, and the act of disciplined physical exertion is inherently satisfying.

But at a deeper level, at a fundamental level understood in antiquity but seemingly forgotten by today's school-budget bean counters, sports help us grow through repeated internal physical and emotional tests. Failure and success temper our characters, teaching us how to survive and excel in the face of adversity not by avoiding it, not by waiting for others to save us, but by saving ourselves and assisting teammates.

Homeland security be damned – none of us ever was safe in this world and none of us ever will be. None of us can ever be sure of what ultimate test we shall be faced with – it may be a deranged student, it may be a terrorist, it may be a virus – but we can be damned sure we will be tested. And sports is as good a way as any to develop grace under fire. Better to fail one hundred times in a judo bout or a boxing match than to try to learn how to succeed the first time you face lethal adversity.

I'm a fan of opera, and no one ever created a more beautiful ballet than Tchaikovsky, but I think there is nothing more artistic than a game-winning goal, touchdown or a home run delivered at the final second.

Americans today are concerned about the increasing levels of adolescent obesity. I would worry less about the bloated bodies than the flabby psyches. Physical education and extracurricular participatory (not spectator) sports are cost efficient ways of addressing both.

Yes, the massacre in Blacksburg might have been avoided had mental health officials years earlier addressed the problem that was brewing. Yes, campus police might have acted more swiftly. Yes, it is possible students could have been warned. But Librescu knew that awareness, armed forces and warnings hadn't prevented the Holocaust. When the gunman came to the door that day, the only defense for the people in that room was immediate confrontation.

As a community, we are confronted every day of our lives, often by enemies who would rather we die swiftly than live peacefully. Every asterisk we attach to legislation regarding marriage, employment equality or acceptance of sexual orientation is a reminder that homophobia survives not through loud confrontation but silent acquiescence.

For several years now, leaders of LGBT sports have been telling me that increasingly their clubs are being joined by straight athletes: people who are not gay, but who want the opportunity to play and accept the orientation and equality of others. This is not a loss of identity for LGBT sports, but rather a loss of barriers for all athletes. It is an opportunity for separate communities to learn from each other and become stronger as one community. Challenges are met as a team, and no individual ducks.

Thirty-two died that afternoon in Blacksburg. Official action sooner might have saved some of those lives, but it might also have cost others. What we do know is that one man's actions saved many.

When Professor Librescu barred the door to his classroom, urging his students to flee for their lives, he knew he was a dead man. But he also knew that if he acted decisively, he could buy enough time for others to live. Is there anything more precious we can achieve in life than that?

Sometimes we call sports stars "heroes." They are not heroes and playing fields are not battlefields. But the discipline of body, mind and will we learn in sports are the stuff that heroes must be made of when crisis arises.

Librescu. You don't need to know how to pronounce the Romanian name for its underlying root to resonate within your soul. Libre. Liberty.

Only the brave are free.