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A Distinct Sense of Belonging

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I am a baseball fan and at the age of fifty-two, I am more interested in and passionate about the game than at any other time in my life.

I am able to say this despite the insane economics in baseball today, with player contracts written in the tens and even hundreds of millions of dollars. I love baseball despite what has become the triennial or quadrennial ritual of complex labor negotiations between owners and players which often involve not only the principals but government bureaucrats, elected politicians, and in some cases the courts. I maintain this affection even with the knowledge that cities across America are being coerced into sharing the cost of building new ballparks through threats of moving long-established franchises if tax support is not forthcoming. And I am able to maintain my passion for the game in the face of seeing The New York Yankees, the team I learned to hate as a youngster, winning the World Series year after year, decade after decade, and what I fear will become century after century. Indeed, as numerous commentators have long asserted, the game of baseball is fractured.

So the logical question becomes "Why?" Why maintain loyalty to an enterprise that is so out of touch and out of balance? Why have passion for a game mired in apparent selfishness and greed? Arguably, by this time in my life I should have developed a modicum of wisdom. So why hold onto feelings about this game I had forty years ago as a boy?

As with most stories, mine has a beginning. I grew up with baseball. At the age of seven I would have responded to the question "Who are you?" in the following manner: I am a boy; I am a Catholic;

I live on Ellsworth Drive in Bloomfield (Connecticut) with my parents and younger brother and sister; I am in the second grade at Wintonbury School; my favorite meal is either shepherd's pie or roast pork and apple sauce, and my favorite dessert is chocolate cake; my favorite month is August (no school all month and my birthday!); I play baseball nearly every day with my friends; and I like the Boston Red Sox—the order of this response not necessarily indicating the priorities in my system of values.

My dad played sandlot and high school ball in Western Massachusetts in the 1920s and 1930s as a left-handed first baseman. My younger brother Steve inherited Dad's left-handedness and position on the ball field (besides pitching or the outfield, where else would a lefty play?). Although I wish I had also been the recipient of this left-handed batting and throwing legacy, I did manage to inherit Dad's love for listening to games on the radio and reading box scores in the morning newspaper. In fact, some of my earliest and most cherished memories involve these traditions, practiced many hundreds of times throughout my childhood. Although I did not have a radio in my bedroom, I would fall asleep at night listening to the Red Sox game broadcast over Hartford's WTIC. The sounds of the game came from a clock radio on a small table on my father's side of his and Mom's bed just across the wall from where my head lay. With few exceptions I seldom stayed awake past the third inning. So the next morning, waking up to the smell of my dad's cigarette smoke, the first thing I'd do (even before visiting the bathroom!) was to walk through our living room into the kitchen. There was Dad with his face buried in the sports section of *The Hartford Courant.* The first words out of my mouth would be, "How'd the Red Sox do last night?" And because the middle and late 1950s were not the best of years for New England's team, his response would usually be a variation on the following: "You mean the Red *Slobs?* They lost again. Buddin booted an easy grounder in the ninth and let the Senators score. Now we're seventeen games behind the Yankees."

In addition to the vicarious participation in baseball I gleaned from listening to radio, reading box scores, and chatting with my dad, I had a direct experience with the game on an almost daily basis starting in the middle of April and ending in early October (around the time of the World Series). On an open field directly behind our house, my brother and I were joined on a daily basis by between ten and fifteen

other neighborhood boys in playing sandlot baseball. On days when we had school our games would begin at 3:00 and go until our moms called us home for supper. And throughout summer vacation we'd more or less mimic what our big league heroes would do on Sundays—play doubleheaders—only we did it five or six days each week. Two or three hours of play in the morning would be followed by lunch and our return to the sandlot field for more baseball in the afternoon.

One of the more surprising things that has happened to me in recent years is that I have found my sandlot baseball experiences to be a rich reservoir of memory and reflection. I have taken sublime pleasure from recalling and even writing about a number of those experiences which occurred forty or more years ago. Stories unfold within stories as I recollect the rituals (choosing teams prior to each ball game), the antics (having our own "Ladies Day" when each of us borrowed our sisters' clothes and dressed up as girls), the improvisation (playing "short" if not enough kids came to fill all positions), the self-direction (umpiring our own games), the bonding of boyhood friendships, and the joy of being children playing a child's game.

One specific sandlot experience I am fond of recalling was actually my first venture into community service. My brother and I had heard about the Jimmy Fund, the fund-raising arm of Boston's Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, from listening to Red Sox games on the radio. We came up with the idea to hold a special "All-Star Game," like the one that was played each season between the American and National Leagues, involving kids on the two major streets in our neighborhood—Ellsworth Drive and Daniel Boulevard. The idea was that, for this one day only, teams would be divided by where each kid lived. We charged an admission fee to parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents and also sold food (our pre-Women's Movement moms and younger sisters pitched in by popping popcorn and baking cookies). After the event we sent the proceeds to the Jimmy Fund in order to help kids who had cancer.

I remember the exact year we held this fund-raising game—1960—only because I still have an artifact from the experience. Several weeks after my parents sent our neighborhood's modest contribution to Boston, an envelope arrived with twenty "Jimmy Fund Membership Cards" as an acknowledgment of our gift. On one side of the card was a black-and-white photograph of my childhood hero,

Ted Williams, with a facsimile autograph. On the other side were a Jimmy Fund logo, a membership number, and a place to sign our name. Each of the kids who participated in our special "All-Star Game" received one of these cards. Out of all the baseball paraphernalia that touched my hands during my childhood years—Topps trading cards, my Rawlings glove and Louisville Slugger bat, various woolen ball caps (with wonderfully supple leather sweatbands), even a score book I brought out from under my bed every year in order to score Major League All-Star and World Series games—this "Jimmy Fund Membership Card" is the only surviving artifact. For that I must thank my mother, although in the same breath I find myself saying that I wish she had also had the foresight to save my Topps baseball cards (I could be retired today!).

In addition to sandlot play I was involved in "organized baseball." I played four years on the Lions team in Bloomfield's Little League program. I don't have many recollections about my Little League days except that my dad was assistant coach, our uniforms were white with black trim, and in my career with the Lions we ended the season in last place the first two years and won the championship the final two. I was a pretty good hitting and pretty bad fielding right-handed third baseman. More than twenty years later, when I became a youth league coach myself, I learned that poorer fielders are often "hidden" at third base (their skills tend to be only slightly better than among those players who are less discretely hidden in right field). However, the adults who managed my Little League career back between 1959 and 1962 were kind enough not to tell me about this defensive strategy.

When I turned thirteen I graduated to a diamond with ninety-foot base paths and played summer ball in what we called an "Alumni League" (although I don't know for sure whether our town was an official affiliate, I expect this was part of the Babe Ruth Organization). In addition, since baseball was my main game and the only sport I actually cared about or practiced, despite my not being an especially good athlete I managed to make the school teams in junior high and high school. For some reason which might be understandable to psychologists (but isn't yet to me), I do not have the salient memories of high school or summer league baseball that I have with my chronologically earlier sandlot days. I do remember with fondness a number of the kids I played with, several remarkable games and plays during

mostly sub .500 seasons, selected travel experiences on the team bus, and ways in which we would conspire to frustrate our military-minded and not-well-liked coach, such as hiding his fungo bat in one of our lockers for a full two weeks which drove him to near madness. I also recall that, while already having been accepted into a college and experiencing the common malady of "senioritis," being on the baseball team was my sole reason to go to school and attend classes during my final semester of high school.

I even went on to play two more years of baseball at the small Catholic college I attended in the late 1960s. But by this time my passion for playing had waned considerably. I was working hard to grow up, to get serious about my life and future, and the game of baseball had little to do with those matters of import. I still managed to allow a little light from the game I loved in my childhood and adolescence to break through the window of my budding adulthood. Most days I would at least glance at the box scores in the morning newspaper. During the summer months I would catch an inning here and there on the radio while spending most of my time working in a printing factory to earn money to support my "adult agenda." I did manage to maintain another personal tradition, one which began in 1958 with my father and brother, of attending at least one game a year at Fenway Park. And I unquestionably shared the excitement much of New England felt in the fall of 1967 when, in my freshman semester of college and on the last day of the season, the Red Sox won their first American League pennant since 1946.

But things had changed. In my college years and beyond, baseball was no longer a prime focal point in my life. I now had close friends who had never played baseball.

I spent more time with the front and editorial pages than the sports section. Most nights, if given the choice between attending a concert or going to a ball game, I would have selected the music. Through my twenties and into my thirties, baseball was mostly a quaint memory of youth, a pastime long past, as neglected as the sandlot field behind our house on Ellsworth Drive which had grown dense with grass and weeds. I thought it would remain there—in a deep corner in the outfield of my consciousness—for the rest of my life.

But something happened on the way to middle adulthood. I got married, had children, and my kids became my agents for connecting their dad back to baseball. At the age of five my eldest child, a boy,

joined many of his peers in our town's Saturday morning tee-ball program. I volunteered to coach. I ended up participating as one of Ryan's coaches through the developmental "Farm League," Little League, and even beyond as he eventually graduated to ninety-foot base paths and Babe Ruth League ball. Two daughters followed their older brother by playing in the town recreation (softball) league. I coached them, too, and some weeks in the spring found myself on a ball field five different nights. But there is no other place I would rather have been.

Playing a game of catch with one's father has been rhapsodized by poet Donald Hall and fiction writer W. P. Kinsella. I am not able to bring forth clear memories of playing with my dad. But my son should not have this problem. Since Ryan was four or five years old we have made it an almost daily practice—in the spring, summer, and fall—to toss a ball back and forth in the side yard or on one of the ball fields within walking distance of our house. During the long Maine winter we invented a game we could play in the basement in which we would throw a rubber ball against the concrete wall on the west side of the house and score points when the "fielder" was unable to flawlessly handle the rebound. Today my son is a college student, but he manages to bring his glove home during breaks so we can continue our tradition.

During a summer vacation in 1991, visiting my parents in the same house in which I grew up, my dad and I made a spontaneous decision to drive to Cooperstown and the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. Ryan, nearly ten at the time, decided to come with us rather than join his mother and sisters for a day of swimming. For each of us—grandfather, father, and son—it was our first visit to Cooperstown. Perhaps I hyperbolize in saying that this experience was in some ways magical as we toured the various exhibits and stopped to examine artifacts. My father, who could usually go hours on end without saying as much as a word, was inspired to tell stories of his youth when he saw a uniform once worn by Jimmie Foxx and a bat used by Hank Greenberg. Then it was my turn to evoke memories and spin tales when we toured exhibits from the 1950s and 1960s, recalling episodes involving Williams, Mantle, Mays, Aaron, Koufax, and Gibson. Ryan was admittedly more interested in contemporary stars such as Ken Griffey Jr., Mark McGwire, and Barry Bonds. But he also loved sitting in one of the exhibit areas in the museum where, on

a television screen which hung from the ceiling, a video of Abbott and Costello's famous "Who's on First?" skit played repeatedly throughout the day. If I'm not mistaken, he watched and belly-laughed all the way through three full performances.

Yes, perhaps hyperbole, but I believe that brief and spontaneously planned trip had a transformational role in my life. Something clicked. I felt reconnected to my own past in a strange and beautiful way. I bought several books on baseball history and a handmade vintage cap. I made a vow to myself that I would visit the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum again. Even more important, I vowed that I would try to read, learn, and make the game—especially its history and role in our culture—a living and generative thing for me and perhaps even for others.

Five years later, as part of my work as a professor at The University of Southern Maine, I was able, in a small way, to fulfill that promise. Thanks to the fact that I worked with a group of especially tolerant faculty colleagues and administrators, I received permission to organize an academic course which involved travel and the study of baseball. Baseball and American Society: A Journey had its inaugural run in July 1996. Forty "students," ranging in age from fourteen to eighty-six, boarded a Maine Line Company coach and departed the University of Southern Maine parking lot in Portland for destinations that included Norwich, Connecticut, Utica, Cooperstown, Scranton, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York City (Yankee Stadium), and Pawtucket. Students who took this course for college credit were expected to read four books prior to departure and wrote reflection papers after we returned (noncredit participants were asked to read, too, in order to have everyone on the bus engaged in our discourse—but only the credit students wrote papers afterward). The bus was a rolling classroom. As we moved from city to city we had brief lectures, gave book reports, viewed videos, and managed discussions on questions ranging from "What role did baseball really play in the Civil Rights Movement?" and "Should taxpayers have to subsidize the building of major league baseball parks?" to "Will women ever play in the major leagues?" and "Is baseball still America's national pastime?"

One important goal of this course is to invite people to experience the game of baseball at different levels of play. To help meet this goal, each year we schedule visits to cities and ballparks in A-level baseball

(sometimes "short season," sometimes "high A"), AA, AAA, and the major leagues. We have also examined amateur baseball through the eyes of the NCAA, the Babe Ruth Organization (when in Trenton, New Jersey), and the Little League organization (while in Williamsport, Pennsylvania). We learned about amateur baseball through the eyes of umpires when we made a stop at the National Association of Sports Officials in Racine, Wisconsin. One year we even had a seminar at the White House and learned about the tee-ball initiative George W. Bush began only months after assuming the presidency.

Along our learning journey we have been fortunate to meet with a number of knowledgeable people in the game—some famous and others not—who have shared their insights and passion. Among these have been recent Hall of Fame inductee Larry Doby (a conference on race relations), long-ago inductee Bob Feller (special focus on baseball players and World War II), Gene Benson (discussion of The Negro Leagues), Rex Barney (Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1940s), Dottie Collins (The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League), Ernie Harwell (experiences in a lifetime of radio and television broadcasting), and Jim Beattie (on the challenges of being the general manager of the Montreal Expos, a "small market" club). We've met with minor league owners, general managers, pitching coaches, radio play-by-play announcers, scouts, umpires, and active players. We've met with a group of Detroit Tigers players' wives to learn about the impact playing professional baseball has on family life. We've met with chamber of commerce executives and other community leaders to learn about the economic and social influences of a professional baseball team in a minor league city, and each year we confer with a baseball historian and museum curator at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown.

One of the most interesting aspects of this experience is the wide range of ages we attract among our participants. Some are traditional-age college students who want an intensive and travel-based course. Several who board the bus each year are younger than college-age, usually the child or grandchild of another student on the course (we set the lower age limit at fourteen). The majority of participants are adult learners—folks in their thirties, forties, and older who are part-time students trying to complete their baccalaureate degrees or who are in need of recertification credit (mostly teachers). Each year we get a handful of older travelers we call our "veterans"—people in their sixties, seventies, and even eighties. These are among the most interested and interesting members of the course and learning community. Through the voices of these elders we have heard about the St. Louis Browns before they became the Baltimore Orioles, how Hank Greenberg became a special hero to Jewish kids all across the country during his great home run hitting years, and even some of the exploits of the legendary Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig when they played as teammates in "new" Yankee Stadium. At times the elders and the kids, who I suspect would never have met if not for this course, sit alongside each other on the bus or in the ball park stands. Stories are told and experiences shared, bringing to both generations an enhanced appreciation for this wide, deep, and subtle game.

Yes, I am a baseball fan. Indeed, I am more interested in and passionate about the game today than I've been at any other time in my life. I understand that baseball, especially at the major league level, has serious problems regarding economics and labor relations that it desperately needs to resolve. I understand that small market clubs in Montreal, Minnesota, and elsewhere will struggle in their ability to generate revenues and in their competitive strength on the playing field. But I also understand that there are myriad levels of the game—played by thousands of professionals and millions of amateurs—which stand beneath and support the high-profile major league peak of the baseball pyramid. As far as I can tell these foundational levels and leagues, several of which I played in as a youth, require little or no repair.

Being a baseball fan means that I follow the game, think and read about it, coach young people to play it, and during one week each summer plan a learning experience in which a group of students and I travel from city to city exploring baseball's history, architecture, influence on society, and the game's manifold glories. Baseball means warm days and nights, being outdoors, and sitting high in the grandstand looking down onto the splendid geometry of a brown diamond carved in a sweeping green field of grass. Baseball means memories of my father and son. And most days between early April and late September (and every so often, in a good year, into the month of October) it means paying attention to the vicissitudes of the Boston Red Sox and, with this, joining tens of thousands of New Englanders in what is more than a 100-year tradition.

Baseball is a pastime—indeed a way in which I pass my time. And because so much of my time has been lived and continues to be lived engaging baseball in some fashion, much of my personal history is there. In many ways the game has become a mirror into which I gaze to see important parts of myself. Reflected back to me are the images of relationships I have made, places I have been, events I have witnessed, and stories which have arisen from all of these experiences, themselves nestling soundly into long-term memory. When the final line score is tallied it will read that for me, being a fan of baseball has meant having a distinct sense of belonging. For that I am grateful.