Leadership as Getting Others to Take Virtue Seriously

1. Joe Ragsdale was the head coach of my little league baseball team in Cherokee County, GA from 1986-1989, when I was 11 to 14 years old. He was a veteran of the navy and was exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. He played minor league 'ball for the Atlanta Braves. I don't believe he went to college. I don't remember him as a master strategist, nor can I remember anything he ever told me about how to play first base, my position of choice at the time because I idolized Yankees first baseman, Don Mattingly. I don't remember anything he ever taught me about hitting. I don't remember him even trying. We had other coaches for that. I don't feel like we had any special bond. I don't think I was his favorite kid, even though I beamed with pride when he awarded me an MVP plaque in 1987. His contribution to leadership on our team, and in my life, was to play the role of "arbiter of seriousness" in a game I loved for its ability to inculcate the virtues of hard work, mental focus, self-restraint, perspective-taking, strategic thinking, and teamwork.

2. By this time in my life I was already beginning to distance myself from the array of southern Protestant religions I had been raised in and, like Annie Savoy in *Bull Durham*, had come to believe in the church of baseball, with all its rituals, ceremonies, investments, history, and holy days, like the opening day of the season, Fourth of July parades, the playoffs, and all-star tournaments. Practice was our Sunday School, game day was our official service, and the field was the temple where we offered everything our souls could muster of physical, mental, and emotional devotion. It would not be very apt to say that Joe was much of a priest, though. For one, he never preached, as far as I can recall. And he wasn't the kind of disciplinarian who made us practice more than the other teams or do mindless drills for their own sake. He would at times make us run laps around the

bases when we did not seem focused in practice. He played the arbiter of seriousness by seeming to know how to make his presence felt at all times by expending only the barest amount of effort necessary.

3. In his build he was very large, over six feet tall in my recollection. He was bald but almost always wore a baseball cap, except for solemn occasions like the memorial service for one of our teammates who had died in a motorcycle accident. He had a bushy brown mustache and a large round belly like Santa Clause. In many respects he looked like, and reminded me of, my father at the time. In one respect their styles were different, and I even remember my father pointing this out: both men were quite overweight by medical standards, but neither sought to conceal it. Joe would wear jeans so tight that his belly hung over them like a Kool-Aid pitcher. If he was not proud of his whole body, he was at least very comfortable for the world to see all of it. He relished his wide smiles despite the revelation of missing teeth.

4. During practice he would leave most of the formal coaching to others, but you always felt him watching to see if you were really focused. He would iterate to us that on every pitch we should expect--nay, *desire*--the ball to be hit to us--and *hard*, to give us an even better chance to cultivate virtue. "You play how you practice," he would say. This attitude became so ingrained in me that I would sometimes finish a game feeling that I didn't get to make enough plays or that the plays weren't difficult enough. Though Joe spent most of the practice on the sidelines, he could again make his presence felt by stepping up and hitting us infield if we had not been taking it seriously (and "not taking it seriously" could be something as simple as snickering after making a bad throw). Joe would saunter up to the plate with his chest bowed out as we prepared for him to unleash fire and brimstone. I always marveled at how a man of his size could toss the ball up in the air and swat at it with the bat in only one hand and direct it with such precision and force, like he was spanking a disobedient child. I remember feeling grateful that he was right-handed and thus could not bull the ball toward me at first.

5. On game day Joe was both his same self and a more lighthearted, even irreverent version. As we got on in our teen years, he would march us off to the outfield before the game and tell us a really elaborate and profane joke that was often somewhat mysterious to me in its references, but I grasped enough to know that I shouldn't repeat it to my parents. These moments had the effect of relieving the tension and bonding us to something that was not to be shared with the outside world. We were like Spartan warriors who had spent so much time in serious training that we could now allow ourselves a moment of levity before battle.

6. Once the game began Joe was again removed but ever-present. He didn't coach the bases and seldom even left the dugout unless it was to excoriate an umpire. He was neither laconic nor garrulous, and he was not eloquent in any studied or literary sense. But he never stuttered or jumbled his thoughts, and he spoke with an urgency in his voice that made you feel that on every play--on every pitch--something could happen to reveal who the serious ones were and who they were not. In his urgent delivery, backed by his character, you could feel that such otherwise banal expressions like, "Get your head in the game!" or "Pick you[*sic*] out a pitch and bust it!" had somewhere been plucked from the King James Bible. On occasions when I did "bust" such a pitch, to get a high-five from Joe on that large, meaty hand felt like a blessing.

7. It wasn't so much that I craved Joe's praise or affection. I generally had the sense that he never played favorites even with his own son (though he clearly loved him). Rather, I craved his affirmation because I held him in such high esteem as the arbiter of seriousness in a virtuous game. Ultimately, his gift to me was one of focus. I can still say to myself, "get your head in the game!" and arrive at a place of calm determination, craving challenges rather than hoping to avoid them.

8. I wonder how well I communicate Joe's sense of urgency, moral clarity, and overall presence, such that I am able to focus others on what is good and what virtues they should be cultivating. I wonder more about whether it is good or

helpful for me to do this. A kid can learn the right way to play the game of baseball by the age of 13 or 14, maybe even younger. That is a large part of its beauty. One may certainly learn more about the game after that, but there are no greater moral dilemmas to be processed. The world itself, though, is vastly more complicated in its moral, political, social, and metaphysical dimensions. It is often as important to acknowledge ambiguity and ambivalence as it is to try to inspire or assuage others with moral clarity.

9. Nevertheless, I still passionately believe in the things I study, teach, and try to practice. The problem is that, unlike Joe Ragsdale, I don't always, or even often, operate in a world of shared values or, to use an abiding analogy, a shared religion. Joe could be effective at what he did, at least in part, because the parents, the players, and the community of Cherokee County, GA and beyond understood the game of baseball in similar terms as mine. There was a history and a mythology that surrounded the game. There were heroes, past and present, who could be referenced, studied, and emulated. It used to make me smile whenever Joe would compare me to Norm Cash--whoever that was. Just to be capable of being part of a legacy was enough. For the humanities, however, the pantheon has either faded or vanished and is in need of rebuilding, it seems, if leadership like Joe's is to look like anything but naive (if well-intentioned) zealotry, to students, administrators, and the general public. I should work to assemble that pantheon.

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