

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 67 – Michael DeVaul – Omega Man

A Masculine Faith

And now a personal word,

I did some reading on the history of the YMCA. In 1842, a young Christian man named George Williams moved from Dulverton, a small rural community in southwest England, to the big city of London. Williams was troubled at what he saw in the city, at the unhealthy ways of young men. He decided to do something about it. In 1844, he gathered likeminded friends and organized a Bible study and social activities to help young men build better lives for themselves. The first meeting took place in the shop where he worked. He called the group the Young Men's Christian Association.

The YMCA promoted Victorian values of physical and mental vigor, usefulness and service, temperance and virtue. As the industrial revolution accelerated and the British empire expanded, YMCA chapters opened throughout the kingdom.

Many thought leaders at the time argued that modern conveniences had made the English too soft. English nationalists and Anglican church leaders launched a movement to invigorate British men and boys. Rugged physical education and certainty of faith was needed to colonize and rule the world. The movement became known as “muscular Christianity.”

Author Thomas Hughes wrote a novel in 1857 called *Tom Brown's School Days* advocating patriotic duty, manliness, the moral and physical beauty of athleticism, teamwork, discipline, and self-sacrifice. Charles Kingsley and Ralph Conner, writers at the time, promoted a life of physical exertion and Christian development.

In an article about muscular Christianity posted in 2017 in Timeline.com, writer Stephanie Buck noted, “In the late 1800s, the YMCA introduced athletic competitions while championing its Christian principles of ‘healthy mind, body, and spirit.’ The organization's charitable underpinnings democratized the idea of a masculine faith.”

She further noted, “Like Britain, the United States was struggling with health conditions in urban areas. Masculine Christianity encouraged people to take up fitness routines, especially as daily life became more sedentary.”

American President Theodore Roosevelt was raised in a household that practiced muscular Christianity. Roosevelt climbed mountains and wrestled bears. The Progressive movement he led linked social reform with masculinity. Remember his famous speech that the credit goes to the man “in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood ... who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall not be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Sport and religion became intertwined. The late 1800s saw the organizing of athletic leagues from association football in England to baseball in America. The YMCA launched new sports: James Naismith invented basketball at the YMCA in 1891. William Morgan invented volleyball at the YMCA in 1895. Professional football began at the YMCA in the 1890s. Y members invented softball and racquetball. The ideal Christian became a physically fit person who prayed to God before fierce competition.

Sport and religion prepared men for the Darwinian struggle. The Young Men’s Christian Association became a place where the Gospel of Christ would be evidenced in the bodies of men. The YMCA trained men for social and economic success. Men of the YMCA would take their place leading communities, corporations, and nations under a Protestant God, with a blue-eyed Anglo-Saxon Jesus Christ greeting members at the door.

The Y of the twenty-first century is very different than the YMCA of the nineteenth century. Vestiges of muscular Christianity remain, but it is a far more diverse and inclusive place. Over the last 175 years, the Y has been one of most progressive organizations in the world, at the forefront of housing, scouting, camping, swimming, day care, outreach, and education. Today it is a place open to all.

Michael DeVaul is the Y, and the Y is him: caring, energizing, connecting people with projects, nurturing potential, and effecting lasting, meaningful change.

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