

Tales from Olympia - 2008



Beijing 2008



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Beijing 2008 - One wonderful Dream

China is a sleeping dragon. When it awakes, the world will be changed forever.

That was what my ninth grade social studies teacher told us in the spring of 1976. In the ten years that followed, the dragon began to stir. In the ten years after that, quite groggy, it struggled to its feet. And in the last ten years, it has stretched its wings (dragons do have wings you know). All of this, along with the four millennia of sleep that preceded it, led to a single fire breathing moment of triumph, an intersection of time and space, in which, at 8:08, on 8/8/08, China threw open its doors to the world with what was, by many accounts, the most magical spectacle the world has ever witnessed.

After 20 years of Olympic pilgrimages, I have had legendary good luck, but never before has the invisible hand of the Olympics been so generous as it was at that very moment. Masquerading as the usual fortuitous sequence of events, the Olympic Gods had bestowed upon me, on that very day, a ticket to the Opening Ceremony, which placed me at perhaps the best possible position in time and space - among 91,000 spectators, 1.3 billion Chinese, and 5 billion humans – to witness the spectacle. Within the colossal two tiered stadium known as the Bird's Nest, I had the great fortune to be seated in the first row of the second tier, at the mid point of the “stage” that consisted of the entire field of play. Stretched out before me, consuming my entire field of vision (because there was no one in front of me), was a cast of tens of thousands, among them the athletes of 204 countries. I couldn't help being emotionally humbled as the revelation struck: the space I was inhabiting at this convergent moment allowed me to experience the greatest peacetime congregation in the history of mankind in a way that so few could. When the countdown to the moment of 8/8/8/8/8 ended in a crescendo of fireworks and fanfare, I was the wide-eyed child watching the friendly dragon rise up on its feet in all of its new found pride. There were 200 flags encircling the rim of the stadium, and as I looked straight upward from the space that I occupied, there directly above me was the flag of China.

As you may suspect, I am no longer a vagabond on a shoestring, thanks to my current job, which now underwrites my Olympic journey. I was there to work – to capture the two-week moment for future marketing business. Fortunately, there is significant overlap between work and play, with the cumulative experience being longer and richer than any of the past Games. Maybe this is a fitting final chapter to “Tales from Olympia” for here in the most populous country in the world, in a place farthest from home, the most ambitious of Olympics was now about to take place.

China!

The connotations are both familiar and resonantly exotic to us westerners. It was, like many of my fellow Americans, a place that one might consider as the last place to visit, after all of the European tourist destinations, after the Caribbean and Hawaii, after Australia and Japan, and perhaps even Africa. It is unfairly called the Far East because we think of it as being, not just beyond the geographic “east”, but beyond our normal

psycho-geographical limits - beyond the familiar and beyond the conventional. It is *far* both spatially and psychologically. But now it was time for China and the world to narrow the gap.

The Best and the Worst of Us

Most of my past visits to Olympia were proletarian in nature, in which securing transportation, shelter, food and event tickets were the ultimate definitions of success. The rest of the experience always seemed to take care of itself, despite the fact that access to various events, parties, dinners and other gatherings were off limits to me and my traveling companions. This is not to say that I have any problem at all with being “inside the ropes” as they like to say in the Olympic world, in which all access is granted by virtue of either guest or occupational status. In fact, this job that I have now involves literally selling such an experience, and I feel infinitely qualified to do so.

As you might imagine, the role has afforded me another unique window into human nature that, at times, contrasts so dramatically with the commoners I’ve left behind. There is a vast difference between the groundlings and the elites. Being thrust into such a position has revealed the upper range of expectations; a nice complement to the modest ones we always carried in our backpacks on our pilgrimages to the Olympic Games. It is here that such expectations range from the high to the immeasurable, in which no amount of fawning is sufficient for the turbo-charged egos that circulate through the venues. The Olympic Games are the best of us – the stage upon which the greatest athletes remind us of what it means to commit to a goal for many years with only the slightest bit of media recognition along the way. But they are also the worst of us. If recognition is a constant, then the deficit of it that is due these great athletes is made up for by the insatiable need for it by those who watch them from their laps of luxury.

It is another inescapable element of human nature – this need to measure oneself relative to others. In the context of the non-athlete Olympic world, the measure of value – status, importance, influence, whatever you want to call it - is stamped very clearly upon what is known as an “accreditation”. Accreditations define the hierarchy of access, and for many, where you fall upon that hierarchy is what defines you. I almost said “defines your status”, but among the Olympic elite, you are your status, so it just would have been redundant.

The precious physical manifestation of accreditations consists of rectangular plastic placards worn around the neck, each with an alpha-symbol designating where you can go and, implicitly, where you cannot. It is a badge that immediately tells all who are privileged to be in your presence how important you are. And as we all know, once someone has an inkling of how important they are, the demons of human nature are unleashed. Their accreditation becomes, in essence, a license to demand more of everything (hotel upgrades, private cars, better tickets, more food) than the lesser-credentialed. They become attuned to the slightest of slights, forever vigilant of the risk of not receiving their entitlements, which are always defined very simply as *that which is*

more than the less-entitled receive. Because it is all relative, the consequence of a slight is an inconsolable version of adult pouting that has cost people their jobs.

But perhaps it is a bit too harsh to be critical of this natural propensity - it can, after all, be traced back to primates throwing rocks. As noted, it is human nature – we all can't escape some knee-jerk inclination to view ourselves relative to others. One might even say that it is the fuel behind capitalism, with wealth as its scorecard. Still, you would think that the overriding message of the Games would remind us how foolish this can be. Consider that the hierarchy for the athletes is very simple – *Gold-Silver-Bronze*. And even then, it is not the winning, but the taking part that is most important.

Generally, I prefer to consider this as a good problem to have. If it wasn't for the magic and meaningfulness of the Games in particular and the Olympic Movement in general, you would never have all these people clamoring to get so “close to the flame”. And the clamoring begins early – eight years in advance, when a city is first considering the daunting endeavor of hosting a Games. There is jockeying and greed and fraud and backstabbing. There are injustices – people being moved out of their homes, millions of dollars being spent on questionable infrastructure, promises made and broken, a bonfire of vanities like none other. These are, by and large, inexcusable consequences.

As I now inhabit the layers of the Olympic semi-elite, I have learned that one of the more important aspects of the Games is the parties. This is because the Olympic “diaspora” is a relatively small group of people within corporate, federation, media, agency, government and other entities. As previously described, the Olympic flame draws these moths in very closely, and the reputations of all of them are very much the sum total of who they are with and what they do. “Talent” and “skills” are very often irrelevant because status is rarely correlated with performance. And so the parties provide the prime opportunity for the preening that leads to either the next big deal or the sustenance of a position.

Almost everyone knows each other because it is a small world we inhabit. Your enemy today can very well be your friend tomorrow, and one gets the sense that everyone is keenly aware of this. Those that aren't are eventually, through economics or personality, banished anyway – it is not good business to hold grudges.

The parties kick off the night before opening ceremonies – everyone is in town and the galas offer the first opportunity to see who's doing what with whom. It is, I suppose, very much like an Oscar party in a way. Athletes drift through, serving as trophies for the ones who introduce them. Business competitors are exceedingly cordial to each other, perhaps because, by Games time, the competition for clients is over for now. But despite the pettiness and shortcomings – despite the worst of us- there is at least the anticipation that so much of this shit can now be set aside as we witness that which is responsible for giving us the privilege of doing what we do: The greatest athletes in the world on the greatest stage that we can possibly set for them. They are the ones who remind us what is best about us.

Humanity as Machinery

The dominant recollection of the dazzling opening ceremonies is one of continuous and precise coordination of thousands of humans to create a “mosaic” like nothing ever experienced. Naturally, with a billion people, most of whom are unquestioningly obedient, this may not be as hard as it sounds. In fact, the coordination is the easy part. It’s the creativity that is the hardest part, because in a land in which conformity is tradition, creativity becomes the rare and often fleeting commodity. Still, with enough international interjection, and tens of thousands of human cogs that are easy to assemble, they managed to do it.

I do not mean to make light of the achievement of the ceremonies – it was unprecedented, awe-inspiring and creative. It provided a rich historic panorama of China that was deeply moving. And it was and may always be the greatest assemblage of performers that gave the greatest performance of its kind. The cumulative experience managed to deliver an underlying message to the world that rests at the heart of China’s rationale for hosting the Games. That message: *China can do anything*.

It is really impossible to describe the ceremony with any degree of detail that could do justice to this claim, but trust me when I say that the privilege of witnessing this affair of such massive proportions succeeded in purging any thought that there were limits to China’s capabilities.

Until, that is, I tried to get a beer at the concession stand.

Behind the scene of the ceremony, within the corridors of the bright and beautiful Bird’s Nest - which had become something of a cauldron due to that evening’s heat (the parabolic physics of it, we discovered, are no different than that of a giant wok) - the lines stretched the width of the passage, 15 to 20 people long and hot. As I patiently waited my turn on line during the parade of 200 or so nations into the stadium, I grew fascinated with the dynamics of the harried Chinese workforce behind the counter. There was really nothing else to do but watch them, and as I got closer, it became apparent that the deficiencies in their autonomous organizational capabilities were of a nature unlike anything we in the western world can relate to. The key word here is *autonomous*.

There was no shortage of people behind the counter – sometimes there were as many as there were in front of it – more than enough to handle what was the thinnest of menus at an Olympic Games, and growing thinner. Once the luxury items like hot dogs and ice cream were exhausted – which happened very early on at every event (I’ll explain why later), all that remained was the Coke, water, beer and Snickers bars. This was still too much for them to handle though. Imagine if you will one or two people actually serving the drinks, and the other 18 aimlessly moving about in a state of vapid disorientation, unable to ascertain exactly what they were supposed to do. Occasionally, they would think of something on their own that seemed like the right thing to do, like putting a few cups down on the counter for the person pouring the beer, and occasionally they would respond to instruction from someone with the audacity to give instruction. But in the gaps between those revelations, they were un-tethered humanoids floating in a sea of

concessionary cluelessness – distressed Chinese youth, un-equipped to respond to the growing impatience of the many foreigners across the counter from them. It was as if they had never encountered anything like this, and neither had I – a perfect Petri dish of organizational retardation.

Now please note - I am talking about “organizational” not “organic” retardation. I am not questioning the intelligence nor the innocence of our Chinese vendors. But for the sake of illustration, the organic equivalent provides an apt metaphor. So imagine for a moment that our servants were missing a part of their brain. This is the part of the brain that governs higher level autonomous thought; the part of the mind that assesses a problem and devises a solution that, upon initial consideration, seems outside the bounds of customary behavior. This is the part of the brain that solves problems without the benefit of formulaic guidelines or rote instruction.

This is the part of the brain that is creative and innovative. And for these desperate and innocent Chinese kids - and I say this with sympathy and sadness, but also with fascination - this is the part of the brain that is *missing*.

Chinese girl #1 requests my order. I order one beer. Chinese girl #1 retrieves cup. Chinese girl #1 retrieves a can of beer. Chinese girl #1 begins to pour the beer into the cup. Meanwhile, Chinese boys and girls #'s 2-15 slowly circle the service area picking things up and putting them down. The girl continues to pour the beer. The beer fills the lower portion of the cup and the rest of it is followed by foam. There is foam in the cup because the beer is warm. The beer is warm because it has been sitting out next to the refrigerator. The beer is warm because the cold beer in the refrigerator has been used up. The beer is warm because nobody put the beer that was sitting next to the refrigerator *into* the refrigerator once the beer in the refrigerator was used up. The girl holds the cup before continuing to pour, waiting for the foam to go down. The twenty people behind me wait until the foam goes down. The foam goes down. She pours a little more beer into the cup until the foam reaches the rim again. We all wait until the foam goes down again. She pours what's left of the beer into the cup. She puts the beer down and rings up the order. I pay her. I leave. The next person steps up to the cash register and says “I'd like one beer”. She retrieves the cup . . . (repeat the above steps) etc.

This scene was repeated at every venue at every event on every day of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Besides the scientific observation, how else did I spend my time on line at the concession stands? With so much time to think, it was no surprise that the wonders of western innovation came to the forefront of my daydreaming mind like the glorious panorama of the American prairie.

Ours is a nation of invention and solutions, of creativity and problem solving. It is a land of competition and diversity, forever cross-pollinating itself with the ideas that have given us flight, both literally and figuratively. It was a warm feeling in many ways, a sense that we have that part of our brain – that autonomous creative part of our brain – that can solve all problems big and small. We can do more than receive input and generate output – we can *make it better*.

Returning to my seat, I was back in front of Oz's curtain, where perfection and coordination and precision reigned. It was the perfect synchronization of humanity, but in nearly all respects, it was not human. Humanity, sure, but these are humans that, it seems, can only do exactly what they are told and very little more. The only real difference between what was going on in front of the curtain (in the ceremony) and behind the curtain (at the concession stand) was that the behind-the-curtain people had no one to tell them what to do, while everything was mercilessly dictated to the performers. In these very rigid contexts, one has to ask, what exactly is the defining element of a human if they are simply another version of programmable entities?

China can do anything? Perhaps not.

Beach Volleyball Baby

My fellow pilgrims, Tom and Travis, and I set our sights on some events. Tom and I got our first event tickets for Beach Volleyball – unfortunately I couldn't get a third for Travis, but I had no doubt he would find his way in somehow as this is an area of expertise for him that he has honed to perfection over the years. The venue was located within a park, necessitating a lengthy walk along various asphalt pathways toward the stadium. Along the way, we witnessed a frenzy of athletic activity – basketball courts on one side, filled to capacity and resonating with what is now the international sound of squeaking sneakers, and the waves of continuous fast breaks up and down the courts. On the other side, a soccer game, the ball methodically being dribbled up the field before a shot was taken. And then back on the other side – a symphony of pinging and ponging – tables and tables of table tennis players. The park was alive and indifferent to the competition we were heading toward.

Beach Volleyball is more than a sports event – it's a happening. As much skill as it is, it is an attractive sport in part because it showcases the bodies of great athletes. It is also fun, with lots of music and cheerleaders to entertain us during the timeouts. Travis soon showed up, and then so did the fiancé of one of my colleagues, and all of his friends. In the end, we had exactly the type of experience that makes Beach Volleyball unique – a social event with a game in the background. It rained a little and we encountered the concession stand insanity that I mentioned earlier, but the event more than lived up to its reputation – a great way to start our Beijing 2008 experience.

At the concession stands, I witnessed at least one occurrence of national shame thanks to the full bloom of the previously described organizational deficiencies. I would say behind this one concession stand, there could have been a few hundred people handling a line of about 20. At one point, a very irate Chinese person started yelling at the people behind the counter. Of course, I didn't understand the words, but I have no doubt that he was saying something along the lines of, "You idiots are embarrassing our country and if it wasn't for the Olympics, you would be immediately executed." This seemed to me an uncharacteristic emotional outburst, considering the typically subdued Chinese citizen.

The final game of the very long (4 hour) six match session involved a Norwegian team, and by that time of the night, there were not many people left . . . except for a very tightly knit group of Norwegians. As you may know by now, there is a very special place in my heart for Norwegians, thanks to my rewarding experience in Lillehammer. They are some of the greatest and most devoted sports fans I have ever known, and the sound of their fight song, *Seier Na Var* (“We are Winning”) still resonates from 1994. I have a connection with Norwegians, which became ever more enhanced by the beers we were drinking that evening. And now was the time to celebrate that connection.

The Norwegians – or Vikings as they were known in the early 900’s, were part Irish anyway because they came down and stole many of our women from the Emerald Isle, but fortunately I have already forgiven them.

Once I convinced them that I was part Norwegian (or more accurately, they were part Irish), I took the liberty of leading the fifty or so remaining Norwegians in a chant in support of their countryman down there on the sand. Since “Norge” (pronounced Nor-Gay) is the way you say Norway in Norwegian, the chant was exceedingly simple:

Give me an “N”

“N”

Give me an “Orgay”

“*Orgay*”

What’s that spell?

“*Norge!!!*”

And so the drunken stupid American of Irish (Norwegian) descent once again rose to the occasion to bring a few moments of great laughter and joy to a devoted following of Scandinavians from halfway around the world.

The Russian Sex in the City

The Olympics create something of a mini Epcot in the host city, in which major National Organizing Committees establish a “house” for athletes, their countryman, and their business dealings. It is a home away from home, as well as a taste of another country for visitors. The Holland House, regularly sponsored by Heineken, has turned this system into an *open* house for the masses (if not an open bar) that is a regular stopping point for fellow vagabonds who don’t have the connections to get into the more exclusive houses. On this evening, parties were moving into full gear at the houses, beginning with the London House, then the Russian House, and then our hotel, where adidas was hosting a massive Olympic kick-off party. Of the three, the most interesting was the Russian House, where I ran into an old friend and confidant named Irina.

It had been a few years since we'd seen each other, back when I was still working on the Russian Olympic bid for Sochi (which we managed to win), and she was one of their most proficient workers. We shared a brief and very secret kind of "spy who loved me" affair years ago that those who know us are now just learning about as they read this. We remain friends, and share the pleasure of spotting a familiar face among the unfamiliarity.

So here we sat in the Russian house with our free Russian beers emblazoned in Cyrillic, talking about where we were in our lives as we let ourselves be distracted. The house was along the banks of some kind of alluvial basin – either a river or a lake – we couldn't really tell, but there were bars and restaurants all along the glittering walkway that encircled the body of water. The most compelling entertainment in the Russian House is the people – an amalgamation of billionaire Oligarch's, stunning Russian models, condescending slavs, a few athletes, and more than one drunken fat guy who is convinced they are somebody because they are wearing Bosco official Russian Olympic apparel. It is very much a microcosm of the Russian elite, where the women are limited to statuesque beauties or Olympic athletes, with the rare exception of Irina, who, with no disrespect to her, happens to be neither.

My four visits to Russia led me to an unfortunate conclusion: It is a terrible place for women. Only recently, I heard that the leading cause of fatality for women in Russia is their husband beating them to death. Needless to say, the barbarianism of the Russian man is very often just below the surface, and under the right conditions, it can erupt into boundless cruelty. It is not a stretch to posit that the darkest elements of Russia, the country, are now a macrocosm of the cruelty, insecurities, and seething desire for eventual dominance of the individual Russian man, but that is a whole nother essay.

It is the *women* I care about! The women!

Irina says her favorite show is the Russian version of "Sex in the City". This kicked off a revealing discussion about the differences between the Russian version and the American version. Let me first put in my two cents about the American version, because it provides the necessary cultural context for so many of these far-reaching hypotheses.

In America's wildly popular "Sex in the City" franchise, you have four women: Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte and Miranda. Now, I was not a SITC addict, but when it was on TV, I was drawn into it by my then girlfriend and found it entertaining. Despite several of my guy friends' distaste for it (which I would suggest is sometimes a threat reaction to these strangely empowered women), I believe that SITC changed our culture in a way that I would have never imagined possible. During a free-wheeling hiatus between girlfriends, I noted a palpable change in the behavior of single women that I attribute directly to the show, and if I do say so myself, it was about time. In my very uninformed analytical opinion, SITC managed to acknowledge and honor the four sometimes conflicting drives of the average American women through its four characters: Love (Carrie), Sex (Samantha), Marriage (Charlotte), and Career (Miranda).

More importantly, it presented a very positive model for “women as friends” which I believe has long been missing in our culture, a culture that previously managed to pit women against each other as implicit natural enemies forever competing for men. A state of inhibition toward men was predominant, not because of what men might think but because of how other women would react. Gratefully, this has been followed by an “after” state of freedom. In SITC, men are secondary to the friendships, which bestow a tremendous amount of character, independence and subsequent attractiveness to the women. These women are empowered to be who they are – as much as consciously possible. And who can resist that, other than a very insecure man?

Or perhaps a Russian.

The Russian Sex in the City, as Irina explained to me, has four characters that bear no resemblance to their American counterparts. One of them lives with her parents. One of them is pregnant. The other two are insignificant. Basically, they have watered down the concept, and why should we be surprised? It must reflect Russian society on some level, and it probably does. It is as if a firehose of Russian male insecurity has drowned all female aspirations. Sure, if you are a woman, you can make it, but the paths are limited: if you are beautiful, either become a prostitute, marry an Oligarch, or take on a job where looking pretty will compensate for the education that has been denied you. If you are not beautiful, just hope you have enough intelligence and money to go to school and become a nuclear physicist or something comparable, because sadly, you are much more likely to be out on the street pushing a shopping cart of shit around or getting beat up by an abusive husband.

Yes, there are exceptions, but I’m not sure how many. Russia is not a good place for women. Irina, gratefully, is a wonderful exception, and an exceptional friend who congratulated me for what I’ll tell you about later.

Moments of Tennis

I ventured with one of my colleagues to the Tennis venue, on a brand new bus that was so crowded that it recalled the last plane out of Vietnam, right up to the yellow kerchief arm band of the woman on board who’s sole purpose was to order people to crush in upon each other to accommodate the next load of humanity. Her voice had that militant barking quality that I remember from the Russian roulette scenes in *The Deer Hunter*.

In the meantime, outside the bus, we rode along the semi-militarized corridor to the Tennis venue, at which point, we would be released to the “entry zone”. Every 50 yards or so, there stood upon a podium a rigid policeman in military dress, staring intently, straight ahead. I would later come across a tank parked outside the media center – not a good location in case there were any concerns about the media finding out about Chinese paranoia.

Once released, we proceeded to security, where our ticket was scanned and we were magnitomitorized, frisked and wanded. The wanding was conducted by a volunteer who

no doubt had memorized the commands with more of an understanding of the timing of those commands than what they actually meant. “Turn round” after the first wandling, and then “Thank you enjoy tennis”. It was kind of cute in a way, like playing some kind of three dimensional video game with an artificial voice.

We made it to Centre Court, and waited several minutes for the break – conventional spectator practice for a tennis match, but I’ve never seen the rule enforced by a several hundred pound large metal gate as this one was. Once in our seats, going to the bathroom meant missing two games, and getting something to eat or drink meant missing four games. The concession stands all were accompanied by unmoving queues, despite each being manned by what could have been several thousand volunteers behind the counter. Ironically, word had gotten out that food supplies were intentionally limited so that they would run out early and ensure that spectators would be in there seats for the competitions, avoiding the shameful possibility that an event would be shown on camera with empty seats. This strategy completely backfired – people weren’t eating, they were standing on line, some only finding out that there was no food when they reached the front of it. Despite the massive technological advancements, there are still people starving in China, and they are all on line at concession stands.

We watched a little bit of Venus Williams beat the crap out of some Czech girl and then made our way out. Outside the venue, near the bus loading area, there was perhaps the largest fleet of new buses that I had ever seen. None of them were moving; they were all parked and driverless as we waited for our bus. Obviously the Chinese ministry of bus procurement had encountered a miscommunication with the Chinese ministry of bus *driver* procurement. A bus did show, another Deer Hunter mobile, and we inhaled on the way back to make room for more people. We managed to enter the Olympic Green – the walled city of sponsor pavilions – and witness the many millions of corporate dollars in various stages of squanderment, unable to draw the massive crowds they had been promised due to security precautions. Only then did it seem appropriate for our minds and our stomachs to accede to a corner of Americana that would finally satisfy our standards of hunger and efficiency.

It was, at that moment, the largest of its kind in the world, in an environment of very very large things. We went to McDonald’s.

Claire and the Great Wall

The Sunday after we arrived, Tom and I made time to go to the Great Wall. We reserved a private guide and van to take us out there, which only amounted to about \$150 total – well worth it. Our guide’s name was Claire. She spoke perfect broken English and had a really nice smile.

Typically, you would ask your guide prepared questions on the intrigue and history of the wonders that we were so privileged to see. But for Tom and I, that’s not enough. We needed to know two critical things 1) How to tell Chinese women that they are pretty, and 2) How to ask them to marry us, or at least that’s what Tom needed to know. Since it

was about a 45 minute ride in each direction, the lessons were intense and thorough, but most rewarding of all: we felt pretty confident that we had probably made Claire and the driver laugh more than they have in years.

We made a stop at a pottery factory – a tourist stop in which one is encouraged to spend a lot of money after feeling guilty about watching the highly skilled poorly paid women turn out their incredible product in person. I didn't buy any - its not microwave safe. Maybe if they can address that issue, I'll buy something next time.

Oh yeah, about the Great Wall: It's really "Great". Seriously, it was not too different of an experience from the Grand Canyon to me, in which it is generally so overwhelming that it exceeds our ability to fully appreciate it. There is a frustration I have with objects that fit the description of "that which is unfathomable". I want to "fathom" them, but it's impossible. I have the same problem with magic tricks – I want to know the answer. I want to know how they did it. In the case of the Great Wall, I don't know how they did it – it seems utterly impossible and beyond my imagination. I suppose it is a product of a period that we can't possibly relate to, in which time is perceptually endless and humans are essentially meaningless. Nevertheless, there is a sense of achievement, standing on the Great Wall, and particularly with my friend Tom – someone that I have shared many journeys with going back to the seventh grade. One can't help but stop for a moment and look off into the distance, at the wall, rippling up and down and over the highest peaks in this nameless range of the very precipitous mountains in central China, and think to oneself, wow! This is Great!!

One Wall, Two Worlds

Humans can be a very threatening species. And over the millenniums, we have developed two methods of eliminating these threats: There is the aggressive method, involving either reactive or preemptive attacks upon those who are threatening; and there is the passive method, in which you create the necessary barriers to prevent those who are threatening you from attacking you. The vast majority of our clans, tribes, nations, or whatever circumscribing categorical name you give them have chosen aggression as their method of threat-reduction. War, I am sad to say, has been the most defining element of history since the aforementioned first primate threw a rock at another one.

There are, of course fringe benefits to aggression, one of which is the understanding that the threat is forever eliminated, the other being the default rights to rape and pillage - at least that was the predominant definition of fringe benefit for our nastier ancestors. These, and the genetic hardwiring that are an unavoidable byproduct of the war-driven churning of humanity are most likely the reasons for the runaway popularity of aggression.

Far less common is the passive approach to threat reduction. There are several reasons for this relative unpopularity, the most obvious being that it is extremely capital intensive. With the passive approach, one must not only forgo all of the fringe benefits of conquest, they must also accept that such threats will always be *out there*, and that the

only way to mitigate the threat is to create a zone of absolute control that cannot be penetrated. Wouldn't it just be easier to go *out there* and kill them and then you wouldn't ever have to worry about them?

You'd think.

But then the downside of the aggressive approach becomes more obvious: maybe less capital over the long term, but very high operational and maintenance costs. Like the Pottery Barn rule, if you break it you own it, so if you're going to invade a country, don't expect to be coming home real soon. This would suggest that the passive approach has a higher appeal for those who just really aren't that crazy about long business trips.

Still, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy that takes hold if the passive approach is chosen. Once the impenetrable zone of control is established, it may be almost as hard to get out of it as it is for anyone to get in. Combine the factors of geographical and cultural isolation, a minimum standard of prosperity, and a few millennia of reproduction, and it will inevitably lead to homogeneity that grows exponentially.

Or, in another word: *China*.

Contrary to the rest of the world, running through China's DNA is this orientation toward the passive reduction of threat, and that can be summed up in one word: *Control*.

China places tremendous value upon control. Control bestows predictability upon the past, present and future, and for the most part, this has been an effective methodology for China. Of course, one of the necessary conditions of control for the passive country is to exclude (rather than kill) that which you cannot control. China succeeded at this, creating a separate "world" upon which it could exert absolute control, by walling off the other world that it could not control. And as we know, this was not a metaphorical endeavor, this walling off thing. They actually *built* a wall.

When you walk along the Great Wall, one of the more astounding revelations is how it winds and ripples its way off into the distance along the crest of the mountains. The edifice is both a marvel of engineering achievement and a testament to what may very well be the highest level of paranoia that mankind has ever known. You can almost imagine some of the workers, at least those that survived the rigors of construction, saying to themselves, or anyone else who would listen "Why don't we just kill them?" The Great Wall was undoubtedly a high priority centuries-long public works project that was never at risk of budget cuts. It is a monument to fear that can be seen from space (or so they say).

So then, you figure, once the wall was done, and they cut the ribbon to open it, the Chinese would be able to breathe a bit easier, right? Time to relax because no one can get in – we got this great wall with a lifetime warranty and so, we're safe, right?

You'd think.

But no, then it was time to build what is known as the “Forbidden City”. This thing is basically a walled city with all sorts of walls and gates and bridges, all intended to make it almost impossible for someone you don’t like to get to you (assuming they could find you in this thing). The control that the Great Wall provided was just not enough – they had to have even more control, so much so that anything outside of their Forbidden City was, of course, forbidden. The Forbidden City is a world within a world within a world, providing absolute control over whatever is within its walls.

At least until they built the Starbucks within the Forbidden City.

Fortunately, the Starbucks has been ousted from the Forbidden City, perhaps because it was determined that \$4 lattes in China are . . . forbidden. At least within the Forbidden City.

The overriding point of all this is that China’s primary defense mechanism over all these millennia has always been to turn inward and build a wall around itself to achieve control - to create a world within a world that they could dominate. So here we were, after seven years of preparation, privileged to attend China’s coming out party; a party who’s slogan was “One World, One Dream”.

As we would soon learn, China proceeded to create their latest and most modern day version of the “Forbidden City” which became known as the Olympic Green. Encircled by barbed wire, strategically spaced rigid policeman on podiums, and an occasional tank, the Olympic Green encompassed the two most stunning venues of the Games, the National Stadium, also known as the Bird’s Nest; and the Water Cube, where the swimming and diving took place. Also within the Green were several multi-million dollar sponsor pavilions, the world’s largest McDonald’s, a skyscraper-like “Pagoda” and the always anticipated Today Show set. In other words, this was the gathering place for the public, and by extension, the world. This is where everyone would be hanging out and having a good time, even if they didn’t have tickets.

You’d think!

But not in China, because you needed a ticket to an event in order to get into the Olympic Green. If you didn’t have a ticket, you could see from a distance all of the venues and pavilions and the McDonald’s. But you couldn’t get in, because you were . . . forbidden. Thus arose the daily sight of many thousands of Chinese people, eyes, noses and hands pressed to the chain link fence, on the outside looking in as their country allegedly opened itself to the World. One Wall, two worlds, and a billion or so dreams of getting in.

Night of the Italian Lesbian

“Don’t these people know what a sports bar is?”

That was one of Tom's observations, and so I took it upon myself to find one. Fortunately, Beijing is one of those cities that is so big that it has everything. This is the melting pot phenomena – you've got so many people from around the world that bring what they love to their new home, and so it becomes part of the fabric of the city. In the case of China, this is a relatively new situation, but in the flurry of construction and activity leading up to the Games, everything has been accelerated, and so suddenly, everything you need is there. The only remaining issue is finding it.

My concierge pointed me toward an establishment known as the *Duck and Goose*, and thanks to the wonders of cell phones – a device that we can't remember how we lived without – Tom met me there in the midst of my conversation with an attractive and somewhat lonely patron.

Before we get on to her, let's talk about the establishment. The Duck and Goose could be anywhere – it is a gritty, overly festooned bar that follows in the footsteps of other global-nationals – with screens viewable in every direction, and every other inch of wall space filled with posters and signage commemorating some sports-related thing. Also included is the experiential “entertainment”: the silly basketball shooting cage, and hockey shooting cage, complemented by video poker, video auto racing, and other assorted video crap. Everything the lard-ass athlete needs. But, oh yeah, we were in China. Didn't matter, because places like this seem to fall into a category of international immunity from fascism, which is entirely a result of the truth that no one from China actually goes to a place like this. I guess one could call it “ex-pat-ronage”. Add to that the burly gray-bearded owner who looks like he's a few years removed from his Harley, and you wouldn't have known where we were.

Back to the lonely patron. She was Italian, and when Travis showed up to join the three of us, we dipped into deeper interpersonal conversation, at which time we learned that she was a lesbian. We suffer from severe “gaydar-tation”, and must have it spelled out to us sometimes.

Things weren't going too well in her relationship lately. Her girlfriend had been verbally abusive to her and she was sick of it, so she broke up with her. But then, she still loved her and the feeling was mutual. While I am not a Lesbian, nor did I stay in a Holiday Inn Express last night, I do now feel like I know something about love (for reasons that I'll still tell you about later), and that, combined with the sage insights that have accrued with my years compelled me to confer my wisdom upon her.

It is, I said, almost always about power. If you can both agree to let go of that and let the walls come down between you, perhaps it will work. At the same time, there is no reason to accept any abuse and tolerate the insecurity that is at the root her abusive behavior. She was receptive – someone who genuinely cares for her girlfriend but is unable to envision her next steps. I told her not to slip – it will only enable the continuation of it. Be clear eyed, honest, and understanding of her own self-worth.

And thus ended the unlicensed therapy session in the Irish Duck and Goose with the Italian Lesbian in the heart of Beijing, China. Just another day in the life of planet earth's quest to bring the peoples of the world together.

Baseball Riots

Thanks to my consulting work with the Canadians in anticipation of the Vancouver Games in 2010, I had the privilege of meeting the manager of Canada's baseball team – a guy named Terry Puhl, who was a star with the Houston Astros through the 1980's. I also met his wife, Jacky, who invited us to join her for the Canada-Cuba baseball game. On the day we were to go, it had rained much of the afternoon, delaying the start of the game by approximately two hours. Unfortunately, the baseball venue is in the same area as the basketball venue, and on this evening, a U.S. basketball game was scheduled to start approximately two hours after the originally scheduled start of the baseball game. With the game being pushed back, now both events would start at the same time, resulting in a perfect typhoon of security/spectator bottlenecks.

We met Jacky outside security and, while Tom went off on a fruitless search for the Italian Lesbian (who we had promised Travis's ticket because the latter had refused to use a cell phone), Jacky and I had at least an hour to talk over our shared experience. I really liked Jacky – she is a true baseball wife – someone who's unending devotion to her husband has adapted to the end of his career and the need for additional sources of income to maintain what was probably a very nice standard of Texas living during his heyday. She appears to be ambitiously pursuing the creation of a viable event-planning business, which is a daunting task considering the number of players in that industry, but she's got the disposition and the energy for it. It was a good thing we had plenty to talk about, because we were cursed with being on history's slowest ever security line, triggering an animated conversation about the Chinese love of walls.

When we finally got to the ticket scanner we were physically held in our place by a policeman buffered by two oppressed volunteers. Beyond the three people holding us, we watched the person who preceded us make their way through the magnetometer, the frisking and the wandering. Not until they had received their "thank you enjoy game" was the next person permitted to enter one of the two empty magnetometers. In the meantime, there were threats of a riot – shouts of anger and the insanity of the security from the more desperate basketball fans who could not yet get in and were on the verge of missing the entire first quarter of the far more popular contest.

When we finally broke through, Jacky and I then were guided into a maze of walls that circumnavigated the baseball field, intentionally (we're sure) taking the longest possible route to the bleachers. Walls all around us, validating the hour-long conversation we had just completed. We managed to only miss the first three innings, eventually catching up to Tom who had made contact with the Italian Lesbian and been informed that she had inadvertently gone to the softball venue (obviously not being able to make the distinction between baseball and softball).

Watching a game with the wife of the manager is something of an emotional roller coaster ride, at least for her. I couldn't have asked for a better color commentator – she knew all of the players, which ones were hard workers, which ones were assholes, which ones were washed up and which might have a chance at the big leagues. But the most interesting element of the game was the opposition.

Cubans!! My first observation of the Cubans was at opening ceremonies. The tremendous fanfare at the beginning and the end of the opening provides dazzling bookends to the tedious parade of nations – 200 teams that march in on one end of the stadium and all the way around the track before taking their place in the infield. Because it is easily one of the greatest moments of their lives, the teams tend to stretch out on the track, milking every second and recording it with their wide variety of cell phone, digital and video cameras. In the case of the Cubans, who have just recently been given the right to have cell phones in their country, the site was one of unending cell phone picture taking across the 100 yard expanse of the tracks back stretch. They were not alone in this – in fact, there were volunteers specifically designated to herd the teams along in their march – but the Cubans were probably the most fervent in their desire to seize the moment with their new devices. If the volunteers were unsuccessful, they could at least rely on the team right behind the Cubans to help them out – the Burkina Faso-ites. These guys actually had spears, which would have come in handy for moving along any people in front of them. Why not just lend the trackside volunteers the spears so we could move this along, I thought.

As for the baseball game, we were the beneficiaries of a clash of Chinese moderation and Cuban/Latin zealotry. A band of Cuban fans sat a few rows below us, and they had no problem staying on their feet and chanting through the course of the entire game. The chanting was amplified by a set of drumsticks, or umbrellas, or something, that they continuously banged against the railing to maintain their rhythm (not that they needed it). At least they were having a good time.

The contrast with the natives was striking, however. Baseball tickets are among the easiest to get, resulting in there being a good number of actual Chinese people at the game. The antics of the Cubans seemed as foreign to them culturally as it was geographically. In their minds, a demonstration such as this would mean detainment, possibly followed by some version of forced “re-education”. Fortunately, nobody was being handcuffed, and the Cuban fiesta continued unimpeded.

Somewhere along the way, Tom and I took turns getting beers at the concession stands, which were being unsuccessfully manned by several hundred thousand volunteers. The Cuban's ended up winning and lots of cell phone pictures were taken.

Kid's night out

Our modest little company has managed to expand into China, advancing the cause of globalization and unleashing our own company wave of vibrant young interns and staff. Tom and I opted for a night in a favorite pub of theirs to watch the China-U.S. basketball game with them, this in favor of a what would have been a futile attempt to score tickets outside the venue. The place - "Paddy 'O Shea's, of course - was conventionally Irish below, with a lounge-like area upstairs and big couches that we all squeezed into to watch the game together. Our Beijing staff was made up of mostly native Chinese, all of them fluent in English and riding the tide of Chinese westernization. There were a few exceptions among them - Kate and Niel from the States, and Jay, our wunderkind American of Indian descent who has managed to master everything we've thrown at him over the last few years, in addition to writing a book on Ivy League Olympians, all before starting his junior year at Boston College.

The game was being hailed as another potential opportunity for China to show how they are kicking U.S. ass in some form or another. The crowd was raucous, the tab was open, and the conversations brought back memories of dorm and fraternity parties. Despite our age - which was especially apparent among this crew - I don't think either of us have adopted the role of wisdom-dispersing sage with any degree of comfort or frequency, perhaps because we don't have much contact with people in their 20's anymore, and the few times that we do find ourselves in their midst is more commonly an indication that we are in a bar that we shouldn't be in. Wisdom is a wonderful thing to have when it's in demand, as it was on this evening. But then, there was much for us to learn as well. China is rising and that is both a cause and effect of this generation's openness to the rest of the world. The thrill of it - the hunger for knowledge, growth, riches and achievement - was palpable among this group. Still, there was a Chinese element to it - cautious, as if stepping into a cold pool, methodical and deliberative, with plans taking form in their minds, and many questions to inform their calculations. But most important, there were a lot of smiles that night.

The U.S. dismantled China on the basketball court, but you had a sense that victory was inevitable for the kids.

Dicks with Sticks

The day before our departure was among the most spectacular of days that Beijing had experienced all year. After the longest string of disgusting, smoggy, polluted particulate-ridden days in Beijing, the government act of shutting down factories and taking cars off the road had finally amounted to something. The sky was a perfect blue and the stunning architecture glittered in the sunlight. The millions of flowers that had been planted along the highways finally looked like they had a reason to live, and between the skyscrapers, you could see a very well defined line of mountains in the distance. It was like one of the better days I remember in the Wasatch valley of Utah, from which my first Olympic journey began, and the effect was a mild state of giddiness. The city looked beautiful.

Tom and I got men's Field Hockey tickets for the evening (aka. "dicks with sticks") in a nice little venue along the semi-militarized Olympic Green corridor. The concession stand was being unsuccessfully manned by 2 or 3 million volunteers, none of which could manage to serve us a beer in any reasonable amount of time. The sun was setting behind the mountains, and the stadium was inhabited by a solid contingent of south Asians and Middle easterners, at least judging by their dress. It was one of our better windows into the experience of Beijing as one of the great international cities, if greatness is defined by relative ethnic diversity. I don't think these people traveled from their native countries to see a field hockey game. I think they lived here, but they were rooting for their countrymen and they seemed to know the game.

We, on the other hand, got bored after awhile. Field hockey is one of those sports in which seemingly trivial performance barriers are put into place to make it more challenging, but with the unintended consequence of making it less exciting. The sticks for instance, look like candy canes and are probably only slightly more effective in moving the ball down the field. They are also very short, causing the players to maintain a constant state of "hunched-over-edness" just so that their sticks touch the ground. One wonders if a team of midgets might provide better competition simply because they would be able to stand up straight.

The game is also, as a rule, played on artificial turf, lending the sport an irreversible quality of artificiality. From where Tom and I sat – way up near the rafters of the stadium – there is the sense of watching a bunch of cane carrying hunchbacks run around a giant billiards table.

Nevertheless, with the clear air and venues sparkling in the distance, it was a nice way to end the visit.

Joy to the World

I can again state with some degree of certainty that the best Olympic experiences are not always the ones in which I am present. They are secondary in nature - experiences that others have shared with me – but they are no less rich, and perhaps more meaningful because they are through the eyes of others. Tom had just such an experience during our stay. He was outside one of the venues attempting to score some tickets. A Chinese girl, recognizing his ever-present Atlanta Braves hat asked him if he was from America. Her name was Joy and she was 8 years old.

“Sure” Tom said.

"I love America," she said. "I want to go to America. Everyone I know wants to go to America."

Ordinarily – like maybe ten years ago – this kind of kudos-Americana wouldn't have been a big deal and we would have considered it a status quo reaction. But these are not ordinary times. We are not quite the leaders of the world that we once were. We are struggling in our endeavors, and questioning our mojo.

But Joy wasn't questioning it. As the conversation continued, a crowd gathered around the little Chinese girl and the middle-aged American man - two worlds engaging each other, the great wall eroding in a most whimsical fashion under the awesome force of tender humanity.

"I like American celebrities" she said. "Do you think I can get to go to America?" Her English was surprisingly good, prompting Tom to ask her, "Are you the smartest girl in your class?"

"Yes", she said, with absolute certainty.

There was an immediate bond between the two. One could say it was the attraction of America that drew Joy to Tom, and will no doubt draw her to our shores some day, but it was also the attraction of humanity – of the things we all share and the "joy" that we feel when we recognize ourselves in someone who otherwise would have nothing in common with us. There is no feeling quite like this – it is the magic of the Olympic Games, reminding us that, despite a world of tragedy and injustices, of war and hypocrisy on the largest scale, there is a place in which humanity, on the smallest scale, can grab that rare glimpse of itself in the best possible light.

And that, I suppose, is the ultimate assurance that everything is going to be okay

Over the Wall and Out

And then it was time to go home.

My trip out of Beijing was a bit of an adventure due to some logistical snafus, but eventually I was placed on a flight to Chicago - one with a bit more of an inland trajectory toward the North Pole - as opposed to my original flight which would have brought me southeast, across the Yellow Sea to Korea for a connection home to Atlanta. The air was clear and visibility even better than the day before, raising the possibility that taking cars off the road had produced a cumulative effect of extended clarity.

I had a window seat, on the left – a westward view as my flight climbed out of the basin that encircles Beijing. I pressed my head against the window, looking downward as directly as I could, hoping to get a last look at a particular manmade object before crossing into Manchuria.

It had been an incredible trip, but I was glad to be heading home. Unlike all my past trips, this time I was going home to Heidi, the woman I was going to marry in just a little more than a month. With great fortune that matches my Olympian good luck, I've managed to find someone with whom all walls have fallen, and so naturally, I was looking forward to getting home like never before.

In the meantime, my feelings for China and the Chinese people were a blend of wonder and sympathy. Wonder because the Chinese were in the midst of mankind's greatest gathering and they were managing it exceedingly well, considering the immensity of the task. Sympathy because it was still not clear what it would amount to. If ever there was

an opportunity for familiarity to erode the stifling power of paranoia that has governed China for millennia, this was it. Of course, it wasn't going to happen overnight, but how could even the most authoritarian Chinese not look back on this experience – an event in which the spotlight shone, hundreds of millions watched, and hundreds of thousands visited (and perhaps several billion tried to serve me a beer) – and not say when it was all over “that wasn't so bad after all.” If the Games of the 29th Olympiad didn't quite manage to knock down the wall around China's human spirit, they at least breached it, and that is a step forward in a constructively erosive process.

And then I saw it below me - the Great Wall - or at least the remnants of it. Among the peaks and passes that we flew over, this was a stretch of wall that had been crumbling under the advance of foliage and the steady rhythm of the elements. The manmade barrier, once continually occupied by sentries who were certain of enemy invasion, was now overgrown – a dynamic state of erosion replacing a static state of fortification.

There were trees and vines, and large swaths of grass and greenery, intertwining, interrupting and obscuring the stone edifice all along its rippling expanse as far as I could see.

It was a fitting last sight of China, and of a most beautiful triumph: this wall, succumbing to the glorious ambiguity of life, and all that life will be.