

Carter and Li Li were politely implying that I should shut up, but I couldn't help it. My favourite karaoke song, "*Imagine*" was playing on the radio. 2005 had been an outstanding year of personal triumphs, and in a few hours I would be on my way to the Olympics yet again.

The gap from Summer to Winter Games is a short one. It had been just 18 months since we left Athens, and my friend Tom and I were suddenly heading off to Torino. But so much had changed for me, a path that had begun with a success of imagination. I left a company of 21 years, without a job, but with enough hope, optimism and inner strength to imagine that it would all be okay. In September of 2005, I returned to the employ of my old boss, Terrence Burns, at Delta who had managed their Olympic Sponsorship in 1996. Helios Marketing is the name of his company, and on the day I was advised that my interim contract assignment would be coming to an end, I received an e-mail from Terrence. He needed me to work for him and his sports marketing firm, the sport of concern being the Olympics. Imagine!

Imagining is the initial act of human will necessary to transform the desirable to the actual. It is the foundation of all great athletic performance - the premise for achieving the goals that enrich our lives sometimes well beyond our imagination. Until November of 2004, I had suffered from a failure of imagination, wallowing under the illusion that the Delta workplace I had toiled in for two decades would somehow rediscover integrity, fairness, honesty and rational behaviour in time to avoid bankruptcy. It didn't, and ten months after I left, they were filing for Chapter 11 protection. Needless to say, I felt like I'd stepped off the Titanic just before it sailed from Ireland. And now I would be paid to work on the Olympics. Imagine that!

A reward perhaps, for my devotion to the Olympic Gods? Well, let's not get crazy. The string of fortuitous occurrences that led me to this moment could be considered a collaboration of fate and faith, which I've always shied away from for fear that it would poison me with expectation and taint my appreciation.

And so I prefer to think of it as the end result of imagination.

Thursday, February 9 - The Pilgrimage begins

Snug against Italian alps, in a valley along the historic River Po, sits the city of Torino, the largest city to ever host the Olympic Games at just under a million people. Like most cities in Italy, it is steeped in history. Not as glittery and worshiped as much as Rome, Milan, Venice, Naples and Florence, it still has its share of stunning architecture and cobblestone streets. Unique, I suppose, in direct contrast to Venice is that the water is above rather than below. The sidewalks throughout Torino are covered by a ceiling of soaring arches to protect the people from rain, giving the busiest streets the bustling din of an ancient marketplace. And in the center of it all is the Mole Antonelliana, a massive spire that is all cupola, supporting what looks like a columned porch in the distant sky. It is the spiritual and physical symbol of Torino and the inspiration for their Olympic logo.

Tom and I were cutting our arrival at Opening Ceremonies a bit close, with a connection in Rome, a cab ride to the suburban Hotel Rivoli, another ride back in, a slim time window to pick up tickets, and then finally, the quest to find the Olympic

Stadium. Another friend (Chris) arrived soon after us, and we were on our way. It was then that we realized just how big the city of Torino is. No longer were we in the customary Winter Olympic Hamlet with a quaint Storgata. This was a major metropolis. And not only had they forgotten to teach the cab drivers where the venues were, some of them seemed completely unaware that something called the Olympics was about to begin in their city!

Tom and I had different seats than Chris, which meant we had to set a meeting place for after the ceremonies. We settled on a massive white column behind the stadium. It didn't matter what this thing was – we didn't know. All we knew was this was a good place to meet when we came out..

We managed to make it to our seats within seconds of the lights going up on the show, pulling our silly plastic ponchos over our head so that we could blend with the other 40,000 celebrants. The show included a number of barely accessible artistic metaphors involving human bodies, guys on roller blades with their heads on fire, a Ferrari that almost spun into the conclave of athletes, a giant inflatable earth and moon, a tangled trapeze that threatened to pull down the stage as it lynched an acrobat, and of course . . . Pavarotti.

But the high point for me . . . well, I'll get to that later.

We found our way out of the stadium, the throngs flowing joyously into the streets. The Games were officially under way. Tom and I quickly made it to the massive white column, and soon after, there was Chris. And when we looked up, the top of the column was on fire. So that's what it was!

Those Crazy Dutch

One wonders if the reason the Dutch love speedskating is simply because it involves frozen water, which it is probably safe to say does wonders for their sponge of a country in terms of mobility. Like cheese-heads with bad cheese, the speedskating venue was layered with the costumed orange of Holland, all of them cheering their athletes around their grassless frozen tundra.

We watched Chad "Wheaties Box" Hendrick win the gold medal in the 5000. Later in the Games he would engage in a petty feud with Shanie Davis that is not even worth going into, so it's likely we saw the high point of both the U.S. men's performance and behaviour in speedskating. (Fortunately Joey Cheek proved me wrong).

A beautiful venue, but there is no greater white elephant than a speedskating rink – it's just not going to bring in a whole lot of Sunday speedskating fans. Unless of course you're in Holland. Too bad that, in the winter, their whole country is one big speedskating rink, so no use trying to do one of those London Bridge transplants of the elephant to Holland – they just don't need it.

Finding the Nightlife Mother Lode

One of my assignments for my co-workers to follow was to find *the* places to go in Torino, and already, this was proving a challenge. Just getting a restaurant the first night for the four of us (Tony had arrived) was an ordeal. You could see it in the faces of the hostesses – they had never seen anything like this before. Like the cab drivers, they seemed blind-sided. Many of the restaurants didn't even bother to create a waiting list. Instead, they would just gesture to us to go away. Those trailing behind us in search of a good meal received the same treatment, just like those in front of us. It wasn't a matter of rudeness – it would be too easy to generalize this into some kind of "rude Italian" thing. That would be unfair of me. I would prefer to

think of it instead as a “*stupid Italian*” thing, in which the errant perception of the now-underway Olympic Games was on par with a crosswords convention. What’s a six letter word for really dumb?

Ah, but it was only temporary, and I’m happy to say that within a few days there was a growing awareness among the locals that something really big was going on in their city. And like past Olympic cities, there was a flush of pride that began with the volunteers (who really did know the Olympics were coming, even though many of them thought that the entire world had learned Italian before they got there), and spread to the young and old. Among the average posse of volunteers, there would typically be one who spoke English. When the others realized that we spoke only English, they would grudgingly gesture to him and he would proudly strut to the front of the group to address our inquiry with the dignity of a UN emissary. We always commended him and he would return to his group with an air of superiority that ruffled the feathers of his linguistically challenged co-workers.

By mid-week, the piazza’s were flooded with strolling Italians mixing with their worldwide visitors. I could tell by looking at them that strolling was their favourite pastime, but the draw was undeniably magnetic now.

The world had arrived.

Zelli Laughs

Just a few blocks from the Main Train Station known as Porta Nuova, along Corso Vittorio Emanuele (named after the first mayor of Torino), was the corner bar that we would make our local. There was quite a buzz the moment the four of us walked in after our speed skating adventure. Katie Couric happened to be running back and forth behind the bar, fulfilling DJ duties and taking requests. But she had never heard of Wang Chung, and therefore she substituted several of her favourites, including American Woman. She seemed genuinely concerned that her musical selections were acceptable to me, which of course they were. Chris and her and I also had a nice banter about aging – something obviously but unjustifiably on her mind as she approaches 49. “It sucks!” she said.

There is no reason for Katie to worry – she remains within a physical and emotional state of healthy youth, and best of all, she’s lots of fun too.

This Couric encounter touched off a rather nasty case of schadenfreude as I thought back to how close Mike Pewther had come to joining us in Torino, and how deeply in love he is with Katie. Naturally, I had to send him the picture of Katie and I, a candid moment of sincere, if immediate, friendship, her arms draped lovingly around Chris and I. In the days that followed, I would receive several e-mails asking me, in one form or another, if Katie and I were dating..

But for the Zelli Bar, it was all in a night’s play. Each evening, Tom and I would end up there, often on the big couch facing the big screen, and inevitably we would be joined by people from around the world.

One night we met a group from Alaska; Becky, her husband Scott, and her brother Zach. They were there to cheer on their sister, Rachel Steer, the best woman biathlete in America. Becky provided insights that could only come from the family of an Olympic athlete and I grew to appreciate the collective sacrifice. It’s not like biathletes rake in the dough, and so it was with Becky and her family who footed the bill for basic living expenses. According to Becky, Rachel has said that she would be retiring after this Olympics, but her single-mindedness and insulation from the real world of making a living and starting a family has left her in a state that Becky describes as “retarded”. We’ll see what happens, but needless to say, we bonded with this family and now have an invitation to Alaska.

Others in the Zelli bar included

- Francesco – who seemed to have a new girlfriend every night,
- The girl from South Africa who swore that she had seen me the week before and that I was married with a pregnant wife,
- Andrea, who was in from her army base in Frankfurt and who's secret romance with one of the other Army guys appeared to come to an end that night (and besides, she wants to sell jewellery in the desert anyway),
- Another Andrea, and her friend Sofia – natives of Canada playing professional hockey in Switzerland. (more on these two later),
- Aaron, the ticket broker who scored us tickets in the front row of the first men's U.S. hockey game against Latvia because we gave him our Russia hats
- Murphy, the pissed off, nicotine addicted wheelchair bound ticket broker - a bitter Aussie who still can't figure out why the Italians don't buy up all his tickets
- Shelly, from Midtown Atlanta and New York, who's nasal voice reminded the Alaskans why they lived in Alaska,
- The rest of the army guys from Frankfurt, some in between visits to Iraq. They were so friendly, polite and of course, courageous, that there was no way Tom and I were going to let them buy anything while we were there.
- Everybody who told me I look like Will Ferrell

The Zelli was our local – we felt welcomed and at home there, and our loyalty was rewarded. We'd walk in to outstretched handshakes from the bartenders, an occasional kiss, and three beers for every two we ordered.

And oh was that beer ever good!

Sestara

The collision of tectonic plates that resulted in the Alps presents one of the most dramatic encounters of farmland with mountain. Although the region is known as the Piedmont, there really aren't any foothills in sight. Off in the hazy distance from Torino, you can see the jagged wall of Alpine rock soaring into the sky, and when you approach that wall it takes on something of a mystical quality, like a Tolkien novel. The mountains and the drama they impose, are like a threshold that one passes through upon entrance, as if entering another world that is simultaneously transformed and transforming.

Alas, our chariot was not quite the mystical vehicle that fit the scene, for Tom and I were passengers on *The Target Express*, the latest clever means of corporate sponsorship marketing to a hopelessly captive audience. It wasn't too painful – one very loud guy and two attractive girls in "Target" garb handing out things that make a lot of noise (whistles, cowbells, those dam inflatable penises that get banged together). The ride into the Italian Alps was spectacular. We de-trained in a place called Ouix ("I'd like to buy a consonant"). From there it was a forty minute shuttle bus winding our way up to the mountain peak town of Sestara. And then a mile walk up and over a hill to the bleachers that sat at the bottom of the men's downhill.

The men's downhill is a premier event, but probably the worst spectator sport in the Games. It only lasts about 90 minutes – each guy gets one run and each run is barely over two and a half minutes long. The last few hundred yards included a death defying leap that at least added to the excitement (though probably for the wrong reasons). And it was a beautiful sunny day. So no complaints here.

A Frenchman won, and then suddenly we realized there were a lot of French in the house. Funny how they seem to appear only when they know they have won.

Before we knew it, it was over and we trudged back up and down the hill, to the shuttle, and on to *The Target Express*. Coming out of the mountains was like

heading toward spring, and from this far north in Italy (just a few miles from the French border) the seasons are somewhat horizontal – a mild phenomenon in which one can ride all the way to summer in Sicily. Italy is an enviable country.

Attack of the Lesbian Hockey Players

Not that there's anything wrong with it – being Lesbian that is.

The one and only fight I know of in Olympic History took place during the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia. It was between Hungary and the Soviet Union, in the wake of a Soviet military crackdown of a Hungarian uprising. Needless to say, the two countries were at virtual war, and that extended to the water polo pool. Before long, blood was mixing with the water, and the spirit of the Games was sadly tarnished.

Maybe it only happens every half-century, but now I've seen two fights. Tom and I were rather surprised at the degree to which ice hockey served as an effective channel for viciousness in women. We went to three hockey Games – two women's and one men's - and it was the women who actually got into a fight. Andrea and Sofia, two unusually attractive Swiss Hockey players of Canadian origin, were equally shocked. This was the Olympics!

Still, the events that unfolded might pave the way for mud-wrestling to eventually become a sanctioned Olympic sport, and with TV ratings falling, all opportunities to expand the Olympic Movement should be explored.

Andrea and Sofia knew many of the Swiss team, having played with them in their professional league. This was apparently the first time the Swiss had qualified for hockey, and it was clear that they were easily outclassed by their Finnish opponents this first night we saw them. According to Andrea, most of them are chain smokers anyway, so by the end of the game, they were huffing and puffing through their chain link face guards. But they seemed to make up for their lack of skill and stamina through a less than discreet strategy of nastiness. Lots of pokes, shoves, hooks and knees in the groin managed to saturate the game with power plays. But nothing in the Finnish game could match the finale of their contest against the Germans the following night.

With the game well in hand for the Germans and the final seconds running off, one of the Swiss girls attacked a German from behind. The play was behind the goal and far from the puck. The method of attack involved knocking the girl down from behind, banging her head against the ice and sodomizing her with the stick. It all happened within the space of a few seconds. The German victim had to be carried off, the Swiss girl was penalized, but the game was over anyway.

Later that night at the bar, we recounted the story to Aaron, who had been following the Swiss team, knew the story and most importantly, knew about the two girls involved.

“Yeah, those two are girlfriends,” he told us.

Hell hath no fury like a raging lesbian hockey player spurned.

The Friendly Neighborhood Communists

Draped across one of those sterile circa 1970 University buildings was a huge banner claiming that “Conflict Lives Here”, a rebuttal to the Olympic tagline referencing passion. Nearby, at a table of pamphlets set up in the shadow of Mole Antonelliana were two young communist sympathizers encountering a very obvious struggle with their recruiting efforts. Needless to say, the moment was ripe for a conversation.

“So what do you think of the Olympics coming to your home town?” I asked.

“It is all about the elite.”

“All about people getting rich?”

“Yes. A few people.”

The conversation was rather stunted due to their limited English. The word “elite” was actually prompted by me, but I’m fairly confident it was the word they were looking for.

“But don’t you think the Olympics are bringing a lot of jobs into the city?”

“Ah, yes, but those jobs will be gone when the Olympics are over.”

They were good-hearted young guys, and I couldn’t dispute that employment during the Olympics was a temporary phenomenon, but like many youth around the world, the cause seemed to serve as a means to define their identity. I could be totally wrong – Communism is a somewhat more legitimate endeavor outside of the U.S., at least in terms of perception – but there was something of an existential nature to the guys. They were friendly and cordial, but at the same time, somewhat resigned to their inevitable defeat. I felt kind of bad for them, but I think the brief encounter that they had with us brightened their day a bit. I almost felt like donning a “hug a commie” T-shirt.

It does seem as though the beauty of a city – like that of a woman – brings with it the curse of everybody wanting a piece of it. Torino is one of those cities, but unlike the stunning obsessive beauty of Florence, Venice or Rome, Torino is more like the Meryl Streep of Italian cities – austere, pragmatic, proficient, and maybe a little bit stocky. But still beautiful.

It’s a big city – just about a million people. After being batted around for several centuries (the French took a liking to the place), Torino finally got its act together in the mid 1800’s. Its history indicates that it was always on the verge of massive economic growth – less interested in the aesthetic obsessions of its neighbours to the north and the south – and more interested in joining the industrial revolution. Consequently, one can imagine the artists and dilettantes who suddenly found themselves in a united Italy having no problem saying to Torino – “okay, you’re in charge.” And that’s basically what happened in 1861 as Torino became the first capital to unify the country. Fortunately, the artistic side comes out most in its architecture. Porto Nueovo – the main train station (just a few blocks from the Zelli) is considered one of the best examples of the confluence of form and function, and likely the inspiration for the classic American train station of the early 20th century (see: the old Penn Station. Or rather, don’t see it because it’s been destroyed, ranking it very high on the list of greatest architectural tragedies of American History.)

Anyway, Torino does appear to be much more about function than form, and that’s a good thing, because you can’t have a society where everybody is an artist. Artists typically starve, unless someone has the money to buy their art. And worse, artists can be somewhat risk-averse in their opposition to oppression – in fact, in many ways it helps their creativity (see: France). So leave it to Torino to be the birthplace of the Italian resistance, the kernel of dissent that eventually led to the overthrow of Mussolini and fascism. It’s not an exaggeration to say that Torino may have saved Italy – they were pesky enough to get the rest of the country behind them and knock off Il Duce. Yeah, you can paint in your studio and it’s likely no one is really going to bother you unless you’re a blatantly subversive artist. But if you want economic freedom, if you want the freedom to make money and keep it, well you’re

going to be plenty pissed if you've got to fork it over to the local fascist commandant. And in Torino, they were.

They kicked Mussolini's ass from all different directions. A decade later, Fiats were selling like hotcakes, and Torino got to keep what it made.

The Shamrock

Across the street from the Zelli is a small Irish pub called The Shamrock. Tom and I would go there for a burger and the warm company of Jackie the bartender. Jackie is from Lake Tahoe. She was here for school but obviously fell in love (with Enrico the other bartender) and decided to stay. Except for Sunday Soccer, the Shamrock was a peaceful place that filled the gap between our daily arrival in the city and the start of an evening event. It was the place where we were most able to hear ourselves think and still be sober. On one of our evenings there, an older and a younger guy strolled in behind us. They were talking, which made their origins easy to pinpoint.

"Where in Boston are you from?" I asked. They laughed. Paul and Bill, brother and father in law of the head coach of the U.S. hockey team, were incredibly fired up. They had just arrived, and were primed for hockey dominance and American pride. Wrapped in flags, they were ready to watch their seventh ceded team pull off another miracle."

"That's just what they want!" Paul said, referring to their underdog status. "They're going to surprise everybody!" We were once again witnessing what I consider the unseen heroism of the family – paying their own way, finding rooms, scrounging up enough tickets and getting themselves to the Games. True, these guys didn't need to sacrifice anything in the recent years to get their family members into the Games, but there is something highly commendable about the devotion and fervour that they bring with them.

And they seemed somewhat glad to see us.

"I'm just glad somebody knows what the fuck we're saying," Paul continued, immediately revealing that great quality of American provincialism that is convinced that there are two types of people in the world: those who speak English and those who just haven't gotten around to learning it yet. We had a round with them and then headed off to watch the lesbians attack each other.

The Russia House

"Don't be afraid" was the cryptic e-mail from a few months ago originating from Terrence's computer. It was a proclamation that encompassed in its simplest form the entire orientation necessary to navigate the cultural shrapnel of the Russians. I work with the Russians now – we are trying to help them attain host city status for the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia. It is inaccurate to say we are "helping" the Russians. We are actually *trying* to help the Russians, because, as I have learned both second-hand from Terrence and first-hand from the Russians themselves, they are seemingly determined to destroy themselves. They are poisoned by an ethic that dictates that success can only come at the expense of others. The concepts of collective good and shared success are alien to them, which leads inevitably to a practice of acquisition by entitlement, sometimes with no limits to the force of acquisition.

As Americans, we are ingrained with an optimism that is drawn from and embraces the ethic of cause and effect, in which the positive outcomes we desire are

contingent on the choices we make and the actions we take. This is the beating heart of the American Dream – an ethic so deeply embedded in our lives that we have a very hard time imagining a world without it.

Russia is that world.

Despite the demise of Communism, it remains a land contaminated by a legacy of unearned privilege – in which there is no connection between desired outcomes and the actions of those who have them - and the result is a thick layer of cynicism among the populace.

“Don’t be afraid” is more about going with the flow and accepting it for what it is. Sadly, that is really all we can do.

The Russia House proved to be something of a microcosm of its country. We arrived with the rest of the peasantry, blocked by the line of Italian security guards trying to look like Russians. We didn’t have credentials and there was no list, but we were “entitled” to be admitted. The bureaucratic buttons that needed to be pushed corresponded directly to Terrence’s cell phone number, and within a few minutes we were handed lanyards that granted us the right to transcend the lowly proletarians and join the privileged ruling class of this once alleged classless society.

We ascended to the rooftop in parallel with our status, and began politely mixing with the beautiful and the magnificent, the pride and pomp of Mother Russia, bedecked in their gaudy paisley Olympic outerwear, sipping vodka and champagne, kissing and smiling, hugging and conversing. Billionaire oligarchs with fur clad blonds on their arms paraded their botoxed trophies, all of them there because they couldn’t *not* be there. They were certainly friendly, but there was also a sense of darkness up there on the roof – one of corruption and the soullessness of unearned privilege. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know it existed in Russia. Perhaps it was simply the high concentration of these people that permeated the air, like the ghosts who rose up in “Poltergeist” when a housing project was built over their cemetery. Later in the Olympics, the Russia House would gain a reputation as the place to be. Perhaps it managed to loosen up as the days went on and the novelty wore off for the privileged, but not while we were there.

Terrence introduced us to Julia, a stunning blond who’s cheerful manner managed to diffuse this ominous feeling. At least temporarily. As it turned out, she was a former Playboy model, and when asked if she was dating anybody, Terrence politely and calmly explained that she was dating an oligarch who would likely rip my legs off and stick them up my ass if there was any suspicion of rivalry.

Another shot of vodka and we were off to the Zelli.

Fun with Latvia

We had been given very nice “RUSSIA” hats at the Russia house, and they seemed to be a hit when we walked into Zelli. We met Aaron and his CEO - ticket brokers who had set up shop at the sponsor village. They really liked the hats, and so we promptly presented our hats to them, which promptly led us to front row tickets for the first U.S. men’s hockey game against the proud and dignified nation of Latvia. It would be a large crew of us, six in all, and in seats that were very hard to match. After a visit to the Shamrock for a pre-game burger and beer – and a near slap fight between Tom and a vehement female Green Bay Packer fan, we headed down to the venue - Palesco Hockeyesco (or something like that). It really was the front row, but surprisingly – at least to me – there was a good number of Latvian’s there.

I had never encountered a Latvian before, and in fact, if you had asked me what a Latvian was, I would have had hard time figuring it out. I probably would have said something stupid, like, it’s more than a “Littlevian”. In fact, Latvia is one

of the three Baltic countries that have managed to re-forge its own identity following the Soviet collapse (the other two being Lithuania and Estonia). Consequently, these are very proud people, still venting the pent up nationalism that was subdued for half a century.

But to me, they were lots of fun. They should re-name their country “Lats-ofun-via” because I can’t imagine having as many laughs (or perhaps “Laughvia), than I did with these people. We sang and danced in the aisles and we really didn’t give a shit who won. While they chanted “Latvia”, Tom and I chanted “Latvia Women”, and they seemed to appreciate that. Yes, I did have a brief and very cordial conversation with the increasingly glum Bode Miller between periods, but that only increased my appreciation for Latvian zeal.

The game ended in a 4-4 tie, beginning the string of disappointing games for the American team. By the end of the Olympics, they had managed to win only one game, against the awesome hockey power of Kazakhstan. (New U.S. Hockey slogan: *At least we beat Kazakhstan!*).

For the United States, the most indelible memory of the Winter Olympics is that of the 1980 U.S hockey team - a collection of pure amateurs. They won not because they were the most experienced or talented team, but because they had played together for a long time – long enough to develop an almost psychic understanding of themselves; of where they were, where the puck was and what they could do. They were so much greater than the sum of their parts that they beat the highly favoured Soviet team and won the Gold.

But now our hockey team is just “parts” – NHL players that take a break from their demanding season and come together under a particular flag, unfamiliar with the nuances and subtleties of each other’s skills, ragged and sloppy in their execution, and a team only to the extent that their uniforms happen to match each other.

The rationale for professional players in the Olympics is that they are the best players in the world. That may be true, but when it comes to team sports, there is very often no relationship between the best individuals and the best team. Let’s hope some day that our country will recognize this, and give another hungry group of young unknown amateurs the chance to make the ultimate dream come true.

Passion Lives Here

I’ve had this problem with passion lately. It’s my fault – I’ve managed to accept a part of my life without passion, which, really, when you boil it down to its essence, is really a forfeiture of life. This concept – the tagline for Torino – that “Passion Lives Here”, is really something of a tautology – if it didn’t, it wouldn’t. I believe that passion is in fact, *life* itself, with varying degrees that, by its very nature, rise and fall. Passion can’t be stable. It must be volatile, because as soon as it becomes consistent, predictable and foreseeable, it cancels itself out. Passion is a perfect metaphor for the Olympics – a short moment in the shared collective life of humanity that burns brightly – yeah, yeah, just like the flame - and moves us deeply before it goes out. Anything longer, anything more enduring, would sap the meaning from it.

We live in anxious times that yearn for predictability. And at my age, I gravitate toward it just like the majority of the herd, but death happens by degree; there are living, breathing people in our midst that are as good as dead. It’s hard to blame people for embracing a life of ultimate predictability, but whether they know it or not, they do give up that one attribute that spiked a half a millennium ago in Italy and still percolates at varying depths within us. It is passion.

And passion is life in its highest form.

Thursday, February 16th - Arivederci Zelli. Arivederci Torino

We hadn't planned on it – we were going to catch a morning flight out, and our habit of rolling back to the hotel around 4:00am promised to be troublesome if we didn't break it on the eve of our departure, but we had to say goodbye. By this time, our entrance into the Zelli was both welcomed and expected, with each of the bartenders extending their hands as they flicked the tap for our pints. We had made the rounds at the other pubs, made who knows how many friends, but the Zelli was our home base and with our impending departure, it was kind of sad to say goodbye. It had become more than a local – it was something of a cocoon, in which we could turn in any direction and share a few words of joy, intimacy, enthusiasm and observations with anyone in our midst. Certainly this is a function of the Olympic phenomena – the deeds of the Gods that place us all together in peace and lubricate the encounter with a magic mix of curiosity and camaraderie.

It remains a gift that exhilarates; a wonderful confluence of humanity that, when experienced and recollected, fills the soul with faith and the eyes with tears

Okay, now . . . you may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. Of course, I really do hope some day you'll join us, and then maybe, you know, the world will live as one.

On that night that now seemed so long ago, the night of Opening Ceremonies, just hours after I sang the song to Carter and Li Li, Peter Gabriel did a much better job singing *Imagine*, but this time in front of billions of people. An e-mail followed from Carter, commending the synchronicity of it all. I hate to say it, but I wasn't really surprised – the Gods have never failed me. But then if I began to *expect* them to come through, I would lose the passion, wouldn't I? During that flight to Athens in 2004, you know the one – when I was questioning my faith and they scolded me for it - well, they changed my mind.

I am in the right place now. They have guided me out of the hell hole of the career I had and into my spiritual calling. A crazy idea to some, I'm sure, but I could make the same case against every organized religion in the world, and stand on the principle that, whether one considers it paganism or agnosticism, there is no more inclusive institution in the world, no greater entity that celebrates and appreciates the gift and the beauty of the *entire* world's humanity, than the Olympic Games. It's certainly not perfect, and I could fall into a superiority trap and claim that this must be what God wants from all of us, but then I would only diminish the essence and inclusiveness of this Movement, and by extension, my belief.

Meanwhile, when it comes to passion, there are no promises. If you must call it a religion – something that typically comes with a promise - fine, I'll take it, but I will do my best to reign in the inevitable expectations that come with all religions in order to fully appreciate the precious gifts that the Olympics have given me. Besides, if I totally bought into the expectations, I would lose the one thing that makes life worth living. Or to put it more accurately, makes *life*.

And that would be Passion.