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We Must Learn to Tell Narratives That Make Us Better – Not Diminish Us

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We Must Learn to Tell Narratives That Make Us Better – Not Diminish Us

By Bruce Janz
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Every four years we turn to our TVs and online sites to cheer on competitors vying for supremacy in an arena where the rules are often unclear and scandal is rife. We hope for an uplifting narrative that shows the best of who we can be, which gives us all something to strive for, but more often than not the narrative degenerates into stories that divide us.

No, I'm not talking about the presidential race. I'm talking about the Summer Olympics. And the narratives I'm interested in are not the ones created by the athletes themselves, but rather by the media.

The Nielsen ratings for this year's Olympics were down about 17 percent from the London Games in 2012. There are many possible reasons – Americans might prefer watching the games in another English-speaking country; people are watching on screens that Nielsen has a harder time tracking; interest in the Olympics among younger viewers has been waning; television watching in general has declined, especially among younger viewers.

NBC has the contract for Olympic coverage, both summer and winter games until 2032, to the tune of \$12 billion. And it has contracts guaranteeing to advertisers a household percentage rating in the high teens during prime time. It averaged a 15.4 rating, lower than hoped for, although the night that Usain Bolt won gold in the 100 meters and Simone Biles won gold in the vault, the rating went up to 17.4.

Ratings are obviously about money, but I am more interested in the kinds of narratives that seem to draw those ratings. In the United States we love to see stories of those overcoming personal challenges or hardship to win. We generally love to see winners win more, at least if we like them as people – that is if they are great characters.

NBC's strategy for coverage has been controversial for some. It has emphasized the human drama, even the reality-show nature of the competitions, as opposed to the sports themselves. Scandal sells, as does a recognizable cast of characters fitting defined roles.

They have been criticized for diminishing the significance of the successes of women and racial minorities. These narratives, in other words, can have an inertia to them, and can be slow to change to recognize new characters and new audiences. Simone Manuel's gold medal in the 100 meter freestyle swimming event is a narrative full of significance, but only if we recognize that it happened against the background of racial exclusion in the United States.

Mount Olympus was where the gods of the ancient Greeks lived. More importantly, it was the focal point for their myths. We think of myths as stories that aren't true, but in fact, myths are stories that make sense of our world, that help us to give a narrative to our world. They help to tell us who is friend and who is foe, what happens if we stray too far from the accepted practices of our people, and how the world is put into the order it has. We might think that we now have science, and so we don't need these myths. But in fact we now just tell myths about science, as well as about everything else.

These myths we have are not just hard-wired into our culture. They are repeated over and over in different ways, and that makes them seem natural, but what they really are is familiar and comforting. In a world of uncertainty, it is good to see Michael Phelps and Simone Biles do exactly what we expected they would do.

But being open to new narratives, even ones that do not fit our comfortable patterns, are absolutely essential. Simone Manuel's medal brings up narratives of race in the United States. Non-African-Americans must find space for those narratives as well, not just as another gold medal but as a triumph over racial barriers.

For the first time ever, the International Olympic Committee decided to honor the competitive spirit of refugees by allowing them to compete without a country. We must be able to honor their ability to rise above their circumstances, but then also include in the narrative the question of why these capable people ended up as refugees in the first place, and how our refugee policies could improve the lives of those like them. We need to be open to Muslim women competing in hijabs – their athleticism is the real story.

So Gabby Douglas didn't hold her hand over her heart during the national anthem. There is no rule, and many other athletes didn't do it at other times. But there was a narrative, a myth about what makes a real American, and for some people, at least, her little action in that moment was enough to question her loyalty. Years of dedication on her part apparently meant nothing in comparison to that action.

Our narratives define us, but we have to do better on telling which ones make us better and which just diminish us.

And, we have to do better on listening and hearing new narratives, those that matter to others around us, rather than just fitting their stories into the ones we already have. We're all richer when we can empathize with these stories.

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