

The Dangerous Conversation:

Creating An Enduring Moral Legacy for 2012 Games

In 776 BC, mainland Greece was mired in war and famine. King Iphitos of Elis asked the Oracle at Delphi for help. She told him to restore the Olympics and declare a sacred truce for the duration of the Games.

Iphitos successfully negotiated a month's truce - or Ekecheria - with Sparta and Pisa. The Olympic Truce became an integral part of the Games and was enforced at every Games for over a thousand years. It was gradually extended from one month to three. It's the most enduring and successful peace treaty in history.

The Truce was a moment of respite in a World of strife. As well as allowing athletes to travel in peace, it created a neutral space in which politicians, intellectuals and artists could exchange ideas freely. As such it was perhaps *the* crucial factor in the emergence of a stable, prosperous and massively influential Greece. It is an irrefutable demonstration of the moral potential of sport's "soft power". It is what Pierre de Coubertin was aiming for when he founded the Modern Olympics.

In fact, the Modern Olympic movement does embrace the idea of a Truce. Since 1993, the Truce has had the status of a UN General Resolution. In 2012, Baron Bates of Langbaugh walked from Olympia to London to promote its use as an instrument of peace. He was saddened by the fact that although "everyone had signed it, no one had done anything with it."

Although it embodies great ideals, without real initiatives, the truce is an empty gesture.

The original truce suspended not just military but also some legal conflict.

We live in a World in which giant corporations wield as much power than most nations. Increasingly, the Games is dependent on the sponsorship and services of those corporations. Recently the activities of those corporations have become more and more controversial. The

conflicts around those controversies are prolonged and intensified by moral cowardice and legal deadlock.

The current dispute between on the one hand the Dow Chemical Company and on the other the victims of the Bhopal Disaster, is just one case in point.

It is a sad and savage irony that the site of the terrible Bhopal Disaster (at least ten times as many victims as the Twin Towers) remains toxic and deadly, while the 2012 Olympic Park has been reclaimed from its poisonous industrial heritage and restored to Edenic beauty.

The situation is mired in a slough of legalspeak. Dow is afraid that even to take a phone call from Bhopal would be to admit to liability.

Given the Games' dependence on corporations, controversies like this are only likely to become more commonplace and more painful.

The Olympics could use the Truce to create a neutral space in which disputants could “lay down their lawyers” - just as the combatants once laid down their weapons - and talk freely and without prejudice, uninhibited by the presence of lawyers, agendas or reporters. Conversations without notes.

Once people start to talk, amazing things happen. But people are inhibited from talking freely now partly because of legal pressures but also because of fear of leaks and wikileaks.

A Legal Truce would break through the carapaces of silence and cowardice that harden around tragic cases like Bhopal..

The idea for a Legal Truce came partly from Olympic tradition but also from a British soldier - Eric Lomax - who was a prisoner on the Burma Railway in World War Two. Eric was waterboarded by the Japanese Kempei Tai. After the war was over he found it impossible to settle into normal family life until - in middle age - he decided to track down and confront his torturer, Nagase. Eric was strongly advised not to do this. No one could imagine that any good could come of it. Eric had no agenda for the conversation. He just knew it had to happen. He met Nagase and within a day or so the two became friends and Eric was

finally able to leave the war and years of trauma behind him. If we only have the courage to begin the dangerous conversation then amazing results follow.

For dangerous conversations to succeed they must have no agenda and they must have privacy and they must take place on neutral ground. The Olympics - perhaps uniquely - has the resources and the moral authority to provide these preconditions. The Olympic Park could become an intellectual “common domain”.

It might be difficult to define ultimately who would be able to - or be allowed - to use that common domain. That doesn't matter for now. If we were to facilitate one conversation - say the one between Dow and Bhopal - under the terms of the legal Truce, that would set a precedent and create a tool which could only add to the greater glory of the Olympic movement.

If it worked, we could envisage a situation in which the leaders of warring or divided nations could meet and talk without prejudice or publicity in future Olympic parks.

The ideology for such a concept already exists in the Truce itself.

The infrastructure is already there in the International Olympic Truce Centre and the Olympic Park.

It would have the advantage of turning the increasing security at the Olympic Venues into a positive.

It would bear witness to the continued potency of the Olympic vision.

It would be a sustainable and startling moral legacy.

FCB