

TO THE FULLEST

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
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The primary takeaway from the collapse of Buffalo Bills defensive back Damar Hamlin during the Bills' Monday Night Football showdown against the Cincinnati Bengals is not that football is a perilously dangerous sport. As has always been the case, torn ligaments, broken bones, and worrisome concussions are routine consequences of the violent collisions that lie at the heart of football's appeal.

By design, the game is fast and furious. On average, NFL linemen weigh more than 300 pounds, but they can run 40 yards in less than five seconds. Defensive backs and wide receivers weigh less but can run faster. Hamlin's cardiac arrest after his unremarkable collision with Bengals wide receiver Tee Higgins may be a difference in destructive degree, but not in kind.

Nor is the primary takeaway that the National Football League has become, especially under Commissioner Roger Goodell, a highly lucrative financial juggernaut hell-bent on achieving revenues of \$25 billion per year by 2027. In order to keep commercials playing and money flowing in, the show must go on — no matter the physical or psychological trauma suffered by injured players.

Nor is the primary takeaway that both college and professional football, like the Boy Scouts, have been permeated by evangelical Christianity. I can't recall a time when public prayer became such a widespread activity. Given all the tragedies and travesties that devastate our common life as a nation and planet, it's an indicator of moral wrong-headedness that more knees get bent in prayer, and more money gets contributed to a toys-for-kids charity (over \$8 million to Hamlin's foundation to date), because someone gets badly hurt playing football. After all, it's a game. As one football-star-turned-commentator admitted, "We're in the entertainment business."

Nor is the primary takeaway that football has become an entertainment mainstay of American culture. It's the most popular spectator sport in our nation by a wide margin, and for many of its most fervent fans, the game provides a sense of identity and community that they no longer find elsewhere. Given the decline of extended families as a formative influence in people's lives, the rise in menial service jobs as a major component of the labor market, and the decrease in participation in religious communities, it's not a surprise that more and more people enmesh themselves in football and other forms of entertainment in their search for identity and community.

Rather, the primary takeaway from Hamlin's collapse on Monday night is that life can change in an instant. One minute Hamlin is a 24-year-old budding superstar playing at the height of his powers in the most important game of his career, and the next

minute his life dangles by a thread. Thanks to swift and aggressive medical intervention, he appears to be recovering without significant neurological damage. Even so, the life he returns to after his brief dalliance with death may well look very different from the way it looked as he drove to the stadium on Monday afternoon.

It's possible that Hamlin will recover sufficiently to play professional football again, but what if he doesn't? What then? Wisely, Hamlin appears to have thought ahead. While in college, he founded a clothing company to provide a vocational alternative for himself in case football didn't work out. He may need it.

Life can change in an instant, as it has for many of us. The question is not whether it will happen, nor when it will happen, but how we will respond when it does. Will we adapt to our new circumstances and reimagine our lives in a different way, or will we remain fixated on the life we once had — or thought we had?

Some years ago, I received an email from a longtime member of All Souls, who had been a top executive in a major television sports network. While her professional life had been successful and to some extent satisfying, she had developed a desire to transition to a different way of life, which would involve teaching yoga and meditation full-time. The transition would require her to fund her training and certification, then adapt to a much lower income. She thought she had a plan for making the move. Then the financial crisis of 2008 struck.

She said, "The stock option shares I was so prudently managing — and that were intended to fund the next three years of transitioning into the much lower pay scale of a yoga and meditation teacher — disappeared one particularly tumultuous afternoon." She spent several days sitting in her living room in a complete panic. Not only had the new life she had imagined receded from sight, but her sense of financial security had disappeared as well.

Then, she said, "I decided to do what in retrospect was quite uncharacteristic for me: I took the less safe route. I decided to go with my gut and follow the path I'd started down, knowing that it would mean continued economic challenge."

A year or so after the crisis, she reported that so far things were going well. She was finding deep satisfaction in her work. She was teaching yoga to HIV/AIDS patients in the South Bronx and to people who suffer from arthritis. She had also embarked on a two-year yoga therapist training program. Reflecting on the financial crisis that impelled her decision, she said that while "the exercise in massive non-attachment was not particularly welcome, it helped me to walk my talk and realize that the most important thing is truly the most important thing."

The point of fulcrum in her ultimately successful emotional transition is what she describes as her exercise in massive non-attachment. We become accustomed to thinking about ourselves as we currently understand ourselves, and our lives as we currently live them, and our futures as we currently imagine them. When provoked by a cataclysmic event that breaks into the status quo in a transformative way, often

negatively, our challenge is to accept the new reality and reimagine our lives in a different way.

The actor Chris Hemsworth soared to movie stardom when he played the superhero title role in the 2011 movie blockbuster *Thor*, a role he has since reprised in subsequent *Thor* movies and in the *Avengers* series. If Hemsworth's fame has thus far escaped your notice, you should probably at least know that he's exceedingly athletic, excessively handsome, thoroughly Australian, and his uncle by marriage inspired the film *Crocodile Dundee*. You get the picture.

In a new series titled *Limitless* produced by National Geographic, Hemsworth plays not a superhero saving the world, but himself — an ordinary human being trying to save his own life, or at least extend it and maximize it. His goal is to find out how we can live better for longer by regenerating damage to our bodies, maximizing our strength, building our resilience, improving our memories, and confronting mortality. The series is both highly entertaining and highly informative. It's currently running on Disney+, and I wholeheartedly commend it to you.

The final episode in the six-part series depicts an episode that deals with the question before us this morning. I won't give away the overall narrative arc of the episode, but I will pass along one story within it about a man named BJ Miller.

In the episode, Miller's story begins during his sophomore year in college at Stanford. He was having the time of his life — sports, friends, travel, and so on. One day, he and several of his friends were fooling around in a train yard, and they climbed atop a parked commuter train. At one point, Miller's wristwatch came too close to the 11,000-volt electric line that powered the train cars. The electricity arced through his body and burned him badly. In that moment, everything changed. He came very close to death.

In order to save his life, surgeons amputated both of his legs below the knee and one of his arms below the elbow. He then spent the following three months in a burn unit.

"It broke me down," Miller says. "My life was over. I was just pure loss. And I thought, 'Who am I, now?'"

Miller goes on to say that this experience forced him to reimagine himself. It took a few years, but eventually, he says, "I let that old body, that old sense of self — I let him go. He died."

Miller continues, "I knew that my identity didn't exist in my feet. I would look at myself in the mirror every once in a while, and say to myself, this is it — this is my life."

As Miller came to accept the new reality of his life, his new identity, he began to imagine his life in a different way. He went to medical school, became a physician, and specialized in palliative care, dealing with people who are forced by disease to accept new and unwelcome realities in their lives.

He says, "My story is dramatic, but it's just a variation on a theme. We all suffer. We all bump up against things we can't control." When that happens, he concludes, our challenge is to accept our new reality and begin building our lives on a different

foundation. This is it — this body we have now, this person we are now, this life we live now, this world we live in now. This is it.

For reasons that will become apparent when you watch the series, the through line of the final episode appears early as a throwaway laugh line: “We live each day to the fullest.” The line becomes increasingly profound as the episode delves ever deeper into situations beyond our control — situations all of us must inevitably face in some way. By the end of the episode, the line becomes a refrain, even a benediction. No matter what has gone before, no matter our circumstances or capabilities, we commit ourselves to living each day to the fullest.

As it happens, the line echoes the last line of the benediction we voice each Sunday at the end of our services here at All Souls. “This is the day we are given; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

This is the day we are given. This is the life we are given. We begin here, where we are, as we are. This is it.

We are given this day only once and never again. Make the most of it. Live this day, and every day, to the fullest.