

**“Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing”
Or “What I Learned From Watching Harold Swerg”**

<https://archive.org/details/HaroldSwerg>



My wife Kathleen and I were — and are — different in so many ways. I grew up in a large family of sometimes very noisy siblings, she grew up in a quiet home with one brother. I love camping, she got more than her fill of camping as a small child when her father would park their travel trailer for days in the middle of a hot, barren desert. I love classical music, and she usually prefers something else. She is skilled in creating beauty with her hands, while I can only stand back in awe and watch. She excels in details, while I struggle to keep the big picture in view. When she drives, she takes the most direct route, while I usually follow the freeway. When I am thinking “turn right,” she

says, “turn left.” She is reliably punctual, I was *born* fifteen minutes late — and I’ve been trying to catch up ever since.

If you were to ask her about the one thing we have in common, the thing that attracted us to each other as marriage partners, the way she will tell it to you is that we were both “serious.” In saying that, she doesn’t mean that neither of us have a sense of humor — though at times she has questioned the shape that mine takes. What I think she means is that we are so constituted that we try our utmost to take one thing in life more seriously than anything else: following our Savior. Jesus, in fact, taught that if we were serious about our duty to God, we could not really be serious about anything else — you cannot serve God and Mammon.¹ In the end, nothing else besides this choice to put God first in our lives matters. From that strategic choice, all the small tactical choices in life flow naturally. They are already determined. The Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard succinctly expressed the supreme state of single-mindedness Jesus demanded of disciples: “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”² How I love Kathleen’s exceedingly pure heart!

For many years, both of us have loved an eight-minute film entitled “Harold Swerg.” Based on a short piece of fiction written for *Sports Illustrated* in 1958, it tells the story of a file clerk who enjoyed his job. Unfortunately for him, he “could hit a baseball farther than any man alive,” “could kick a football farther than any man alive,” and “could run the mile faster than any man alive. ... Harold Swerg could do anything. ... Only he wouldn’t.”³ He just wanted to be left alone to do what he considered to be the most challenging important job in life for him: retrieving and replacing file folders and documents in their proper place in a large row of filing cabinets.

Before continuing with the story, you should know that there is a Church calling that Kathleen and I have always secretly aspired to serve in together — ward librarian. In that regard, I have a personal confession to make. Both times I served as a bishop, as one of our initial actions during the first weeks, we swooped down to organize the ward library to clean up, clear out, and organize things so they would conform to the latest Church guidelines. This was, of course, before the day these places became “media centers,” at a time when most of the library resources were still printed or mounted on paper. No doubt in part out of the satisfaction of seeing at least something tangible put completely right every once in a while, we both would go home happy afterward. On the most obvious level of the story, Kathleen and I can relate to Harold Swerg — on our last mission we were delighted to serve as office missionaries and in our current temple mission we enjoy not only the spiritual joys of working with in the Lord’s House with people we love, but also the temporal joys of technical and clerical work when the president and matron ask us to help them or the staff with any appropriate aspect of temple operations.

In the case of Harold Swerg, everybody from the President of the United States to grocery store customers tries to force Harold to participate in the Olympics, but he holds out as long as he can before agreeing to “the play the game” like everyone wants him to. When he finally agrees to participate, the viewer wonders whether he has at last compromised his principles. Still dressed in his suit and tie, he goes up against the

Soviet Union's greatest baseball hitter, football kicker, and mile runner (the story was, of course, written during the Cold War). Surprisingly, however, he does not beat his opponents. At the climax of the story, the whole country is shocked and embarrassed, and Harold is formally brought to justice with the accusation that he did not give his all. You will have to watch the video yourself if you want to see how the story ends.

Kathleen and I first checked out the film from our local library almost three decades ago, and eventually bought a copy. Over the years, we've shown it to our family and to some close friends, but though the story brought a few laughs and vague comments, we suspect that most of them didn't take away the same lessons that we did.

Besides the file clerk angle, I should also confess that one reason I like the film is that I don't have much of a competitive streak in me when it comes to sports or even to board games. With respect to sports, I was and still am quite uncoordinated, and with respect to most parlor games I feel like I'm wasting precious time. (Admittedly, with adults, games can be a way of building friendships, but I'd almost always prefer personally doing something productive together as a means of building relationships. Of course, playing with young children is important — that's a whole different matter.)

What is the most important lesson that I take personally from the story of Harold Swerg? The lesson of "exactness"⁴ — I have learned through my own failures that it is the infinitely more difficult to obey the Lord with exactness in whatever the He requires of us at a given moment than it is to follow the crowd and push our way to the front in the rat race of the world. Obeying with exactness requires both the ability to unflinchingly discern God's will — whether directly from His "own voice or by the voice of [His] servants"⁵ — from all competing persuasions, and also the rock-solid faith to carry it out completely until it is finished.

That God can bear with each of us in our weakness until we approach "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ"⁶ is my constant prayer.

References

- Feiffer, Jules. 1958. *Feiffer's People*. New York City, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1998.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. 1844. *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. Translated by Douglas V. Steere. New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1956.
- Packer, Boyd K. "Obedience (7 December 1971)." In *BYU Speeches of the Year*, 1-7. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1971. Reprint, Packer, Boyd K. "*That All may Be Edified*": Talks, Sermons, and Commentary by Boyd K. Packer." Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1982, pp. 253-261.

Endnotes

¹ Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13.

² S. Kierkegaard, Purity. I was grateful when I discovered these words from Elder Boyd K. Packer, which express so well what I feel (B. K. Packer, Obedience):

I desire to be good. Some people would be ashamed to say that, but I am not. I want to be good. I want to be a good father. I want to be a good servant of our Heavenly Father. I want to be a good brother, a good husband. That is not easy. I sometimes fall short; but when I do, I have a steady grip for which I reach. I cling to one rod that relates to the decision about wanting to be good.

When the judgments are rendered and I stand there for my accounting with the list of infractions to be reviewed, there is one thing that I can cling to. From the day of that commitment the element of intent is absent. Intent cannot be introduced if I really want to obey and I want to be good. I live in the hope that when I stand before God that fundamental truth relating to obedience and agency will be operative. When it is, it opens the great portals of mercy.

³ J. Feiffer, Harold Swerg, p. 45.

⁴ Alma 57:21.

⁵ D&C 1:38.

⁶ Ephesians 4:13.