

Living with a syndrome

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If you didn't know who Tim Howard was before yesterday, there's a good chance you'll know him by now. As goalkeeper for Everton football club, Howard once scored a goal from open play. But as goalkeeper for the USA football team, he made a record-breaking number of saves (15) during his side's 2-1 defeat to Belgium in an entertaining Round of 16 game. While the USA have been knocked out of the tournament, the USA team, managed by German Jürgen Klinsmann, won the hearts of many neutral fans, with Tim Howard's performance being singled out for praise. His name has been trending on Twitter up until now and one creative internet troll edited the Wikipedia article for the United States Secretary of State (an office currently held by John Kerry) giving the position to Howard. Vandalism? Yes. Forgiveable? I'd like to think so.

Today, however, I discovered something about Tim Howard that surprised me: he lives with Tourette's syndrome. This condition is characterised by tics, which are sudden, repetitive and non-rhythmic motor movements or vocalisations. In extreme cases of the condition, people shout out profanities uncontrollably, which can be (understandably) quite alarming. The condition was first brought to my attention about 7 or 8 years ago when I was an undergraduate student: Reading an edition of the New Scientist magazine, to which I was at the time subscribed, I discovered a personal story of someone who lived with Tourette's. I was astonished by the description of what this person experienced, as it accurately reflected some of my own behaviour. It dawned on me that the weird, involuntary movements that I sometimes make are not unique to me and that others experienced them too.



If you don't suffer tics, it might be hard to imagine what they're like. Imagine feeling the need to tense a muscle over and over again, without reason, but feeling compelled to do so, with increasing anxiety if it isn't flexed. Or blinking over and over again, not because your eyes are dry but simply because you feel the compulsion to do so. My tics have evolved over time; I remember that when I was a child I used to touch my chin with my hand, in a downward rubbing or scratching motion. These days I tend to rotate my hand around the wrist to make the joint click, or a similar rotation at the right shoulder joint. If you spend some time with me, you might notice these

idiosyncrasies.



But I must admit that for the best part of my childhood and adolescence, these tics were a source of shame and frustration. The Divine Principle explains that in order to live a blessed life and become an object of joy to God, every person must unite their mind and body in harmony centring on God. Unable to control my body's urges and movements, I felt like a failure. How can I claim to be a holy person if I can't resist the urge to make such tiny movements? Would this inability be multiplied when the scale of the temptation also grows? I felt terrified of myself, terrified that I would be unable to bring my mind and body into harmonious union.



Tim Howard claimed, in an interview last year with the German newspaper Der Spiegel, that his tics disappear when he is focused, particularly in the serious moments of a game. He also found relief in meditation. The fact that he has Tourette's doesn't bother him, and he simply continues to live his life relatively unaffected by it. Likewise, while I continue to experience tics, I don't allow them to bother me and just continue living. Occasionally I notice the tics, but on the whole they just happen and I let them pass. As I am typing right now, my right bicep is tensing suddenly and my right hand rotates

around the wrist joint with a click. When I do practise meditation, I focus on controlling the tics, and some relief is experienced by being able to conquer those urges. Giving into a tic feeds energy back into the body creating the urge for more tics, in a negative feedback loop. By focusing on resisting the first urge, the energy dissipates and it becomes much easier to resist future urges, demonstrating the principle that give-and-take action creates the forces required for existence, multiplication and action. By consciously choosing how my mind and body will respond to each other in give-and-take action, I can control the forces that will dictate my destiny.

While it's a fanciful dream, I will never be a competitive goalkeeper. Nevertheless, just as Tim Howard has become a hero to many young aspiring goalkeepers, he has become a hero to me for his determination in disallowing his condition – a condition with which I relate – to interfere with his life.

Image Credits

<http://mashable.com/2014/07/01/tim-howard-american-hero/>

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