Renewable energy: On the other side of mortal travail

by Carol Zaleski in the November 30, 2004 issue

Andy, age nine, is jumping rope without a rope. “Is that your invisible jump rope?” his brother John asks him. “No,” says Andy, “it’s my happy rope!” Anticipating a promised hayride, Andy jumps his happy rope clear across the apple orchard we are visiting, the very picture of energy and exuberance in all its four-foot, 50-pound, never-take-a-nap glory. Like his brother before him, he devotes the last hour of every evening to racing back and forth across the house. Then he goes to bed, his energy reserves not a whit depleted, with a parting remark of the sort one would like to preserve in a bottle: “We have a wonderful life, don’t we?”

Energy, William Blake said, is eternal delight. But Blake was wrong; energy is a youthful, and therefore transient and corruptible, delight. Eternal delight reveals itself not when we possess energy in natural abundance, but when our energy is depleted and then mysteriously renewed by a source outside ourselves.

This lesson came home to John and Andy during the World Series. As if it weren’t wondrous enough to see their beloved Red Sox come back from a 3-0 deficit and win the pennant from the Yankees in a four-game streak, there was the near hallucinatory spectacle of the Sox recovering the world championship after 86 years, under a colossal red moon in full eclipse. Emblematic was Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling on the mound, bleeding from his foot like the fisher king of Arthurian romance, after a makeshift procedure in which doctors used his own skin to hold a dislocated ankle tendon in place. Emblematic, too, was Curt Schilling at prayer in the dugout, and his postgame interview after game six of the ALCS did more than a legion of youth ministers, praise teams and high-octane catechists could do to make Christian faith compelling for young fans.

“Seven years ago I became a Christian, and tonight God did something amazing for me,” Schilling said. “I tried to be as tough as I could and do it my way game one, and I think we all saw how that turned out. I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to

do this alone. And I prayed as hard as I could. I didn't pray to get a win or to make great pitches. I just prayed for the strength to go out there tonight and compete, and he gave me that. I can't explain to you what a feeling it was to be out there and to feel what I felt."

One can hear the collective "harrumph": how naïve, how breast-thumping, how jingoistic it all seems. But John and Andy understood Schilling's testimony. He was not claiming a peculiar divine privilege for the Red Sox, but praying the prayer of a Christian: Lord, give me strength. My natural energy is gone. I cannot do this alone. With this act of surrender comes a surge of confidence big enough to sustain, even as it chastens, a major league ego: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13).

From the standpoint of naturalistic psychology, there's a simple explanation for Schilling's experience. It's "second wind," first identified as a psycho-physiological phenomenon by William James in a 1907 address on "The Energies of Men" given to the American Philosophical Association. Our mental and physical resources are much vaster than we imagine, James observes. For the most part we do not tap them but wander about in a fog, oppressed by habit, inhibited, half awake. In times of crisis or intense excitement, however, the fog lifts, revealing on the far side of fatigue a vast reservoir of energy. Pain is dampened or overcome, hope supervenes upon despair, weakness yields to superhuman strength and skill. No doubt the experts on human performance could explain this via the psychology of suggestion and the neurochemistry of endorphins; but the sense lingers for us, as it did for James, that an intangible spiritual force is involved. Moral energy is a mystery in which free choice and surrender of the will both play crucial parts. If Schilling embodied abandonment to divine providence, his teammate Manny Ramirez was the exemplar of invincibly cheerful self-determination, declaring at the MVP award presentation, "I don't believe in curses, I think you make your own destination." God respects the freedom of his creatures, and when he dispenses grace, does so through natural channels and in cooperation with the moral will.

Some day Andy will figure out that he has no future as a major league baseball player. He will learn weariness, illness, struggle. His exuberance will be tried, his happy rope frayed. Then comes the real test. Will he accept his circumstances, whatever they may be, as a unique commission, a job appointed to him and to no one else? Will he ask God to help him do his best? Will he try his hardest, but admit when he has come to the end of his resources? Will he discover in the midst of life's

ordinary drudgeries the moral equivalent of baseball? Energy renewed by God is eternal delight, and it waits for us on the other side of this, our mortal travail.