

Hello Friends,

It's a sacred time on the world's religious calendar. The Muslim month of Ramadan begins next Wednesday. Christianity is roughly mid-way through the forty days of Lent that culminate with Holy Week and Easter. Judaism celebrated Purim last week and is another three weeks from Passover. If you're part of any of those traditions, I pray this is a meaningful season for you.

On a different calendar, one that many people follow in a way you might call religious, it's also a sacred season. March Madness, the three-week men's and women's college basketball championship tournament, is upon us. The local team, UNC-Asheville, qualified for the men's tournament for the first time since 2016, and my college alma mater, Furman University, made it for the first time since I was a freshman in 1980. I'm picking a Furman-UNCA final, and if it happens, remember you read it here first.

My body is too old now for anything more than shooting baskets, and I rarely pick up a ball. But for a good twenty-five of my younger years, I spent double-digit hours each week on gym floors, playgrounds, and driveways, playing this beautiful game. I'm not suggesting that my personal game was beautiful, nor am I suggesting that the commodification and capitalization of the game is beautiful. But the game itself—moving, dribbling, seeing, sensing, sliding, waiting, passing, running, bumping, jumping, jawing, shooting, bricking, swishing—the game is beautiful. And boy, did I love it.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi wrote a famous book called *Flow*, about the experience of being fully absorbed in an activity and energized by it. Basketball was one of the first places I experienced flow. (The other place was singing in church. Whatever faith I have—and I don't consider myself an accurate judge of that—whatever faith I have, it was sung into me.)

All this basketball talk is preamble to a poem written by the late, great Brian Doyle. I hope you already know his work, but if you don't . . . Brian Doyle was a staggeringly prolific essayist, poet, novelist, and editor of *Portland Magazine*. The first of his novels I read was the first he published, *Mink River* (2010). Reading that book made me want to be a better person. I finished it, ordered 20 copies, and gave them away to friends and family. If you want a good taste of his non-fiction essays, try *One Long River of Song: Notes on Wonder* (2019, published posthumously).

Doyle was diagnosed with what he called a “big, honkin’ brain tumor” in late 2016, and he died the next spring. In the months leading up to his death, an [Oregon newspaper](#) asked him what people could do to show their love and support. “I’ll hear all laughter,” he replied. “Be tender to each other. Be more tender than you were yesterday, that’s what I would like. You want to help me? Be tender and laugh.” Anyone who knows he’s dying, gets asked that question, and gives that answer is the real deal in my book.

Anyway, here's one of his poems, from a collection called *A Shimmer of Something: Lean Stories of Spiritual Substance* (2014). It's about basketball, darkness, and the gracious mystery

that gets us to morning. It wouldn't feel right to say anything else after the poem, so I'll say here, thanks for reading, stay in touch, be tender and laugh.

Ball

Long ago I dated a woman who turned out to be even more unbalanced than me. This is a most remarkable statement because I was a parade of idiots at the time. Our affair soured almost immediately but neither of us had the guts to surrender. Finally one night we had a screaming roaring shrieking fight and I snarled, I quit. She said, If you break up with me I will kill myself and have you beaten to death. She said this very cold and calm and indeed she knew lots of thugs and convicts. I knew her well enough by then to know she was completely and utterly serious. Any intelligent man would at this point have approached police and/or attorneys And moved abroad and changed his name and face and filed off his fingerprints, But I drove home, at about two in the morning, and got into my basketball gear And dribbled down the street to the park and shot baskets until the sun came up. I remember shooting and shooting until I was sure my arm was going to fall off. The streetlights clicked off as I walked real slow back to my ratty old apartment. This sounds like a totally stupid male way to deal with a crisis but everyone has Places they go when they are scared and exhausted and have to just go mindless. The same thing happened when my grandma was dying when I was twelve, We would go to see her in her clean white quiet room where she got tinier every Day and when we would get home my sweet mama would say, Is there anything You want to talk about? but I would already be down the street with my holy ball And at the park I would run past all the games and all the guys waiting for nexts And find an empty court and just shoot and shoot. It's sort of hard to find words For what it meant to me, and the ball is so far gone from my hungry hands now That it seems crazy to even try to articulate it. You will think I'm melodramatic When I say maybe basketball saved my life, but I leave you with this one image: A guy in the middle of the night in a city long ago with his hands shaking so bad He could hardly get a grip on the ball, but an hour later, under the old streetlight, I hit like eleven in a row and was panting and pleased and something was healed.