

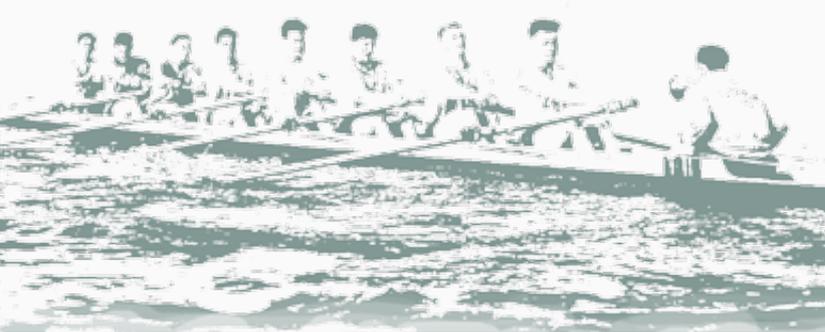
REFLECTION



The boys in the boat

'As they flew down the last few hundred yards, their eight taut bodies rocked back and forth like pendulums, in perfect synchronicity. Their white blades flashed above the water like the wings of seabirds flying in formation.'

(Daniel James Brown, The Boys in the Boat.)



Daniel James Brown is talking about the rowing squad of the University of Washington which won the Gold Medal at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. The physics of eight men rowing a boat has as its upper limit the achievement of a moment so perfect that it transcends itself. It's not a matter of adding up the combined physical

Robbie Young reflects on those rare transcendent moments, when we experience being one with our fellow human beings.

strength of the rowers. The individuals in the boat must merge into one, as if one single person was rowing and not eight. How can

eight be one and at the same time eight? How can anyone rower know that he is perfectly in tune with the other seven rowers as well as knowing that every rower is perfectly in tune with all the others? He knows because when it happens he feels as if the boat has transcended the limits of physical laws. It's as if it is no longer bound by the friction of boat against water, of bodies against wind. But even more than this he has the 'mystical' experience of eight persons being one person. He is in the others and they are in him.

Most of the time, perhaps all of the time, we live together in families, work together in offices, drink together in pubs, eat together in restaurants, talk together as friends without experiencing a similar unity. Why is that? Why is it that when we come together we are not fused into one? Culprit number one could be our individualism. Two drivers overcome by road-rage, shouting at one another are hardly going to experience a transcendent moment of being one. But there is also the danger of being caught up in a false unity: the marching boots of a dictator's army, the chorus sung at a drunken party, the conformism fuelled by peer pressure, the common purpose of a terrorist cell.

Of course life goes on even if we are not mystically united into one. We are intelligent enough to know that we must come up with a set of rules for our society which somehow mandates cooperation while leaving space for individual freedom. There is a certain form of unity in cars stopping at a red light and driving through a green light, in putting robbers in jail and allowing people to choose their holiday destination. In other words we settle for less. Perhaps because we have never experienced anything more. Or perhaps because we feel that mystical unity is not something we can ever aspire to in everyday life. In one way we are right: as human beings we are rooted in flesh and blood, in anxiety and sadness, in vanity and vice. No amount of mystical unity can protect us from the almost unbearable pain of a severe toothache, or the heartbreak of a broken relationship.

But at one moment of their lives the *Boys in the Boat* experienced it, not so much as something of their own making, but as a gift from a mysterious set of circumstances which brought them together in a precise moment in time, together with the humility to surrender themselves, to allow it to happen. ■