The quiet sun is mystifying astronomers all over the world. There has been no activity on its surface for months on end, no sunspots that would be expected to occur in a normal solar cycle. In fact it's at a 100-year low for sunspot activity. Some scientists believe that the sun is dimming.

A quiet sun and a cooler upper atmosphere have made this July one of the coldest on record in many areas of the country. Here in New England some of our stock have devolved from stubborn to stupid. They're packing up the kids and heading to the beach the moment the temperature breaks 68 –not realizing until they arrive that it's ten degrees cooler on the shore. These defiant tribes can be seen scattered on the sand huddled together in sweatshirts. It's fun to laugh while driving by in a heated car as Kool & The Gang's "Summer Madness" haunts the speakers. This is shaping up to be "The Year Without a Summer" and we're all wondering what's going on.

Things are bad everywhere. Even the bums are competing with the rising ranks of nouveau bums and they're asking for dimes again. A dime is better than a dirty look. The discarded newspapers they use as blankets are getting expensive. The Boston Globe is facing bankruptcy after 137 years; and ever since it jumped up to a buck at the stand, no one's buying. A panhandler on Morrissey Boulevard should stop over and tell one of those stuffed suits a dime is better than a dirty look. Sometimes you'll find one of those quaint broadsheets wrapped around the leg of a park bench. Be charitable and open it. Read how President Obama's approval rating is sinking back down to earth while the unemployment rate continues to trudge upward towards 10%; that's the highest it's been in more than a quarter century. If you're feeling especially morbid, read about what seems to be an epidemic of suicide.

This is a time of tribulation.

It was a Jewish folktale that gave us the phrase "this too shall pass." But that means more than it seems when you think about it. Everything is a matter of time. An active solar cycle will return in time, the temperatures will eventually normalize, the information industry will evolve, Obama's approval rating will climb and fall as has every President's before his, and the economy will expand and contract. Hope and promise will rise again like twin towers. Time will see to that.

For flesh and blood, time begins as a friend, as a healer of wounds, a giver of things long sought, after things long-suffered: a college degree, a promotion, a baby, a title. Time walks ahead of us, always out of reach as it opens doors, clears obstacles, and teaches wisdom. Then we age and stumble and can't keep up and it gets away from us. We'll shake a liver-spotted fist at the clock while clinging to times gone-by like a drunk to a lamppost. The good 'ole days, we'll call them, and the older they are the better they'll be. Up ahead, the friend from our youth will eventually stop on the road -on our road. He'll turn and face us, and we will gasp when we notice that he is dressed in black and carrying a sickle. Time the destroyer.

All flesh marches fearfully towards oblivion. It is written in nature, in the lines on our faces. The first moment of life begins the countdown to death. It's only a matter of time.

Is it any wonder then that we need heroes, heroes who are at once timeless and transcendent?

Battling Blackjack (nee Lonnie Craft) was a heavyweight who fought Charley Burley and Zora Folley. He killed his wife and was sentenced to be executed at Arizona State Prison in 1959. He walked to the gas chamber dressed as if he were headed to the ring, wearing boxing gloves, shoes, trunks, and robe. That may seem zany, but was it? The ex-fighter needed to feel brave one more time, so he conjured up a heroic archetype and wore talismans. He became a boxer again. Then there's the story from the 1930s that Martin Luther King Jr. told of a 19-year old African American condemned in North Carolina. As potassium cyanide pellets were dropped into the gas chamber, a microphone was said to have caught him saying "save me, Joe Louis, save me, Joe Louis, save me, Joe Louis" as he was dying. Another version, probably the true version, has him shivering in boxer shorts, throwing uppercuts in there.

Unlike most civilians, the boxer is acquainted with his mortality. He must explore frightening questions, questions that civilians usually can't bring themselves to explore until death is standing on the porch. The boxer's experience is, in a sense, existential: Boxing shows a man who he really is. Stripped down to his trunks and stripped of all trivialities and pretenses, he is a man in dialogue with himself. This dialogue is as intimate as it gets and the forum in which it happens is as public as it gets. He who wins shares what is an ecstasy of triumph with the crowd. He who loses must sometimes face profound humiliation –or worse. The spectators in the stands witness this existential dialogue and understand what is at stake; for they too are human beings, they too understand victory and defeat however mundane theirs may be. A great fight is therefore spellbinding for more reasons than concussive violence. The truly connected spectator understands at some level what is being articulated before him; it is the universal struggle of life, to be recognized, to stand up, to go on. A strange comfort is also derived from the experience, precisely because the Grim Reaper is present –the fourth man in the ring. There, under the lights and in full view of all of his eventual victims, the fourth man is dared, flinched at, and flirted with, even as he points a bony finger. We love it.

We cherish our brave ones, victors and vanquished alike, as much as we mythologize them. Without really being conscious of it we are celebrating ancient virtues and taking a sabbatical from a modern culture gone mad with political correctness. We lose ourselves in a celebration of fantastic masculinity. Need evidence? Watch the fight crowd as the bell rings to end a blazing round and you will see graying men jump up and down like pogo sticks and strangers embrace across rows. Sometimes you'll see two strangers jumping up and down while locked in a lover's embrace, self-consciousness in flight, their heads cranked at the ring. Boxing can bring an almost spiritual exultation.

The boxer is and must be far more than a simple athlete. Other athletes are familiar with sweat and tears, but not with blood. Many of them are locked in perpetual adolescence. Strip away their size and advanced ability to run and jump or hit a ball, ignore the bloated salary and celebrity, and something surprising may come into focus –their fields and courts are playgrounds. They are called what they were called when they were in high school: athletes.

And they are still at play. The boxer is not even called an “athlete,” he is called a fighter, a gladiator, a conqueror, a king. He does not “play” boxing. He fist fights in a claustrophobic area with no one to help him. It is self-reliance writ large. No helmet or shoulder pads for protection and all vitals above the waist are laid bare. Like the laborer, soldier, scientist, craftsman, artist, and mechanic throughout human history, he will rely on his hands. Sometimes he fights as if his life is at stake. Sometimes it is… Two young fighters became casualties of the ring in July –Marco Nazareth and Francisco Moncivais. Their names will be etched in the monument of our memory, for they fell in battle.

The boxer, like any heroic figure who risks everything for glory, has earned attention in the arts, literature, and politics. He has spawned countless references to his ring experiences in slang and idioms that you hear every day from people who don’t know the difference between Marciano and Graziano. The legends and so many less perfect (but no less loved) practitioners are rightfully frozen in time after they pass their prime, retire, or just get old. Their images are locked in the cryogenic tanks of our hearts –forever young, forever formidable, forever there to teach us courage in the face of ancient enemies like fear and death.

These champions have effectively KO’d time the destroyer. They are not supposed to die.

Alexis Arguello, Arturo Gatti, and Vernon Forrest went down for the long count on July first, eleventh, and twenty-fifth, respectively. Alexis’s death was ruled a suicide, only now there is talk that he was killed by a government he had grown disillusioned with. Arturo’s death saw allegations that he was killed by a disillusioned wife, only now it is ruled a suicide. Vernon was shot multiple times in the back after he chased a robber with his three guns –all three of which were registered, two of which were fists. They were international representatives of the Sweet Science and reflected well its diversity, nobility, and style. Arturo was a banger, Vernon a technician, Alexis –both. And they had heart. They taught us much wisdom in their spit bucket seminars.

Black July, with its quiet sun and deserted shores was an unnatural month. The death of champions is a phenomenon that feels just as unnatural, but the death of so many inside of one month is surreal. They are not supposed to die; they’re supposed to just fade away, leaving us with myths and heroes intact as we march through this world as bravely as we can…

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