

Mens Sana in Corpore Sano

Thought for the Day

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Listening to *Great Lives* on BBC Radio 4 this week, I was struck by the timeliness of the subject – the Roman satirist Juvenal, who was described as the rudest stand-up comic ever! What I didn't know was how many common expressions, that are still used even in the original Latin, are his one-liners. It was Juvenal who first spoke of *panem et circenses*, bread and circuses, both as a political bribe and a distraction from higher purposes. It was Juvenal too who bequeathed us the alleged goal of an all-round education: *mens sana in corpore sano*, a healthy mind in a healthy body.

So why was this timely? Well, even if you've been touring Mars in the new American landing craft, you could hardly have missed the Olympic spectacular, the world's greatest celebration of the healthy body, and probably a far far greater circus than ever Juvenal could have imagined!

Then this week saw the unforgettable launch of the Paralympics. I was a bit troubled, though, by Sebastian Coe's opening injunction to "prepare to be inspired, prepare to be dazzled, prepare to be moved." Why should *these* athletes "move" us, rather than excite, overawe, or even daunt us? Is there not a hint of pity in that word? And yet of course we cannot and should not ignore their enormous achievement in overcoming physical disadvantage.

This was resolved for me in that breath-taking opening ceremony. The participation of Stephen Hawking was inspired as well as inspirational. From the references to the Higgs boson and the Big Bang to Shakespeare's

"How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in't!",

this was, as the organisers said, "about science and humanity" – a celebration of the mind as well as the body.

Juvenal's ideal was "a brave soul that lacks the fear of death, that is able to bear whatever kind of sufferings, and prefers the labours of Hercules to the feasts and feather bed of an Emperor."

– How's that for a slogan for the Paralympics?!

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