

## The Purge

My dad passed away in March 2001, the same month as his 63rd birthday. His passing hit me the following March. That entire month I commuted to work, sat at my desk, got nothing accomplished, commuted home, sat, slept. It was a long month. My unspoken goal over the last 21 years was to outlive his age. That accomplished, now is the time to purge myself of now longer cherished acquisitions. I started with my running booty.

Dad left behind wonderfully designed wooden boxes that he created following his early retirement. He made one for my wife, our son, and for me. There were more that he made and I took them all. Some I gave away as gifts. Others we kept and use them for fun and assorted storage.

In the months following his death, in helping my stepmother remove all of his many items, I realized he also left behind a long, narrow closet with clothes hung on each side. He stopped wearing any of these clothes after he retired, preferring to wear jeans and a flannel shirt. I am not his size so we simply boxed and bagged the items for delivery to a local charity. But that was some 20 boxes and 10 bags. That is a room full of clothing, unwanted and unused.

Over 20 years later, my wife and I are going through our “priceless” possessions that we have each moved from our childhood, our collegiate years, grad school times, and throughout our respective careers. Simply put, these are things we haven’t looked at in over a decade, or longer.

Open a box, peer inside, reach in, extract each item, one by one. A memory slowly comes to the fore, a slight smile, perhaps a laugh, perhaps a tear, but always the inclination that it is not longer necessary to ongoing happiness. Can it be displayed, worn, or used in some way. If not, does it qualify for a lone box of trinkets only meaningful to one or both of us. We have a lot of stuff that is dump bound, or off to our local charity, or merely to the trash collection can.

I opened one of my boxes, the lid covered in dirt with a light dusting of mold. I found race memorabilia inside. From my prior lifetime, when I was fast and thrilled at pushing myself for any distance from two miles to a 15km, with too many marathons to count and an occasional half to boot. Ribbons, medals, plaques, trophies, results sheets, postcards with final results from the race organization personal to me. Each from races in college, grad school, early career, and beyond. Run ‘em, place or win, accept the award, display it for a time, toss it into a box. This box.

A cardboard box that, once opened, exposed timed-out treasures, each no longer meaningful. A small trophy, a runner attached A small trophy with a prefabricated runner atop the short and tiny pedestal, a piece of thin metal attached to the pedestal containing the race name, designating third place overall. That was my first win. I placed that on the credenza next to my desk in my home office.

A faded horse-style ribbon from a 5km race recalling a wet, spring day. A small plaque showing I'd placed in a 4-miler in the middle of a sweltering summer. A well-earned wooden plaque, showing a second overall, from a mid-winter 15km raced the day after a huge snow, a race in which I ran alone from mile three to the finish, seeing no one behind me and never seeing the winner. That was the race of the roaring indoor fire from the humongous hearth. That one is now recycled.

There were numerous results pages from different races, some typewritten on a single page, others multi-paged slick productions. With each result, I located my name, my age, my time, my place. Those all went into the recycle box, along with the paper race awards. No further memories to be had.

The deeper I went into the box, I found more ribbons, more trophies, more plaques of success. Some were unique, catching my mind's eye for a moment, albeit briefly. Pulling each one out individually, I had visual confirmation that 1: I have been running a long time; 2: I clearly did not mind putting myself out there to see if I can succeed or fail on my own; 3: I raced a lot, always finding a race more fun than training. I've always been a good test taker (eye roll).

I touched each one, pausing in appreciation that someone ordered those trinkets of success and that I was the one on that day to be awarded that memento. Each time I looked over an award from long ago, I realized that the moment had long since passed and, it wasn't something I determined to be worthy of being in our house when I pass. I can't take any of it with me.

My dad's wooden boxes give me warm fuzzies; memories of a man who was a better friend than he was a father, though he was always my dad. That's what I desire from the race mementos that remain. At the bottom of the cardboard box was a teal fire-stoked pottery plate, the race name emblazoned on the front, on the back the age division placing for male runners 50 and over. I mean from age 50 to death, an exceptionally long age group. I trained hard for that round plaque at a time when my body was adjusting to not having an active thyroid and deepening Type II diabetic age.

The race shirt wooed my heart: tie-die with a jolly roger on the front. Who wouldn't want to wear that, especially with the race slogan wrapped around the skull and crossbones announcing its presence with authority, "trample the weak and hurdle

the dead.” Ya gotta be that kind of runner to appreciate the inspiration. Run in the remaining heat and humidity of late summer, the race starts in the pre-dawn darkness, finishing in the early morning light. As is my wont, I glanced at results from prior years, seeing that the oldest age division of which I was now a meaningless member covered every decade from 50 and beyond. My usual finishing time put me just outside the five place finishes offered. I could do better.

Not knowing how my medical issues would allow me to train with the quality of effort needed, I plunged ahead, registered for that race, digging into each day’s run with the bright, shiny object of success always in my head. Weekly track sessions, early morning runs into each day’s climbing heat and humidity, were constant. Weekend long runs, sharing the mid-summer misery were the norm.

Convincing a running friend of equal pirate in him we showed up for the race early, having left late into the night before, sleeping in the industrial parking lot used for the start/finish. Starting a race at 5 a.m., in complete darkness, does not equate to waking up five minutes before the start.

Replete with flashlights and headlamps, the racing multitude which included me, walked to the main road for the start. I saw nothing but blackness until the dawn’s early light edged itself over the distant horizon. The rising sun let me glimpse the time on my running watch as I passed the halfway mark. OMG! I was ahead of race pace, I felt great, and there were other runners to pass. Off the main road, we raced through adjoining neighborhoods, along tree-lined streets, past curious dogs and more curious residents. I counted my roadkill all along the second half of the race; no one willing to pass me.

Racing past the last mile marker, cajoling my body to gut out one more mile and my brain to get in line with the program, there was one more runner to catch. He turned the final corner onto the long straightaway just before I rounded the same turn. Intuition told me to catch him, pass him, leave no doubt that he would finish behind me. I did.

Finishing with a flourish, walking gently to water, a bagel, an orange, and to the results stand, Letting out a pirate’s bellow, I discovered I’d earned the final place award for my age group. The runner I caught finished just behind me. He was in my age division. The three-hour drive back home was sweet, the handmade plaque placed in my running bag. That one I placed on my work desk corner, resting on a flat black trivet, warm fuzzies just oozing out of that one. Our son will know the meaning of the plaque. He’ll keep it somewhere in his house, sharing it with his children, long after I’m gone. Dad would be proud.

After I emptied the cardboard box, I caught myself gazing out a window, thoughts swimming by like a school of fish in a hurry to go somewhere, anywhere, together, without meaning or seeming purpose. I snatched the lead thought before it got away, turning it over in my mind, seeing its dimensions and its meaning. I missed consistently racing.

Training for and running marathons are rewarding. The miles piling up, the training pace improving, the toughening of the mind, and the consistent effort in maintaining the projected pace are all grand endeavors. I realized I come from a different era: when we raced almost every weekend, just because. I wanted that back.

No matter than I am now not fast nor competitive. The fact that my track intervals are now slower than my easy pace from long ago doesn't dissuade me. Neither am I hesitant to train at being faster. I am fast for where I am, not against other runners in my age group, but as compared to myself yesterday. My tempo runs are strong, for my ability. My easy runs are laughingly extremely easy, without any effort on my part. My consistency the key to my success. Rock Hunter got nothin' on me.

This is the first summer I've trained specifically for shorter races since too long ago. There will be weekly solo ventures onto the track starting just before dawn, hour-long runs that include a section at tempo pace, the mostly weekly weekend longer runs with the running kids followed by the requisite brunch. At least once each month from here to dead of winter, there will be at least one, if not two, races of shorter distance.

I'll be that old guy lined up at the start, dismissed by the younger, faster runners and a minor nuisance just ahead of the walkers. I'll pass a few who should know better and finish behind others who will never know I was entered. I may place or I may not. The effort will always be strong. Then, I'll be a name on an electronic results page, emblazoned on the internet for those interested. The execution in training, the thrill in feeling racing's effort, the self-satisfaction from living all mesh into the warm fuzzies I'll leave behind, some long time from now.

Purging myself of extraneous material items I don't need and no longer want is a good thing to do at my age. They also call it downsizing. Purging, downsizing, cleaning out, are not cause for melancholy thoughts. I am not alone in my, ahem, old age. I have running, my joy, my warped humor, and that table lamp and that phone book.

Dad always looked askance at me for running, though he lived for alpine skiing. Our son sorta gets it because he grew up with my running and he lives for golf. My wife tolerates it because she wants me happy and not grumpy, and she landscapes our yard. I have over 40 years of running logs. I get it. Purge that.

