

I had a beer.

After I woke myself up at 4:00 a.m., before the alarm went off 15 minutes later. I even woke up before our cat, who ignored me while he slept next to my wife. Had I arisen an hour later, he would be leading the charge to the back door, which I would dutifully and with great practice open for him, watching him prance onto the porch, one step down to the deck, and then down the steps to the lower paver-filled yard deck, before he checked out his fiefdom, disappearing into the shrubbery. Not this morning.

Walking through our living room into the kitchen, reaching the coffeemaker, pouring some of yesterday's coffee into my yesterday cup, placing the cup into the microwave, selecting the time needed to make the contents of the cup just hot enough, I pressed the start button, and waited less than a minute. I opened the microwave door before the beep could start. I headed to the bonus room.

Turning on a softly-lit lamp on the sofa-back table sans sofa, locating the clothing I left out the night before, I sipped the coffee. After putting on running shorts, double layer running socks, and a summertime running shirt with perforations, I sat down with my running shoes in hand. In just mere moments, I had expertly tied each shoe over my feet to the appropriate snug fit. The run was going to take some time.

Taken from the utility room refrigerator, cold water bottles were placed into my running bag, along with running gels, running hat, sunglasses, towels, change of clothes, and kicks for after the run. Running a double check of needs for this run, and then running a similar mental check, I located the running watch in the running bag's side compartment, saw the body glide, the toilet paper, and the sunscreen. When there was nothing left to check, with wallet and cellphone both now in the running bag and the running bag slung over my shoulder, car fob in hand, I quietly unlocked and opened the door to the garage, gently walked the seven steps down in the semi-darkness, placing the running bag in the front passenger seat.

After I sat in the driver's seat, I pressed the garage door opener button, fastened my seatbelt, placed the charger into the cellphone, waiting until the garage door was fully open before turning on the car. Backing out from the garage, looking into the rearview camera, making certain the cat wasn't awake and behind me, I pressed the on button for the sound system, followed by the garage door closing button, the

same button that opened the garage door. The time was now 4:45 a.m. expecting to see headlights from trucks pulling boats and cars filled with fishing gear while I approached the street side of our driveway, I saw nothing but the last bit of darkness for the day. I turned onto the street, heading to my day's solo venture.

52 weeks a year, I take out our trash can and our recycling bin for pick up. Almost each weekend of each week for each of the last 45 years, I run a longer run than during the week with my running group or I race. This morning's run was not with my running group. I was not racing this morning. This morning's run would be solo and was more important than almost any other race. the run, its location, the pace, and the distance, were all integral to this morning being a successful run for me, leading to accomplishing a goal, fulfilling a hope, and justifying my intentions in my own mind.

Less than a handful of times in a calendar year, I choose to drive to another city 35 minutes southwest of our house on a weekend morning to run on a bike path that parallels a small river. The path goes from one trailhead just north of the downtown to a major park 11 miles away. The shortest I've run on this path is 5.5 miles out to a pocket park with a restroom (when open) and a water fountain (when on). Running the full distance out and back is a big ask; an ask I've done just twice. I would run this tree-covered path, with its gentle ups and gentler downs, more often, except for the rain.

A steady, long rain, or, a heavy rain lasting just long enough will cover the path in its middle miles, which is where the path is the same elevation as the river. When the river has more rain than it can use, it offers the excess to the path. That water travels over the path and into the low fields that are separated from the river by the path. The low fields send the water back to the river with the gifts of muck, mud, and slime. Any attempt to run through that slippery mess is accepting disaster and failure. Ruins a good run, too. The summer rains came earlier in the week and were neither sustained nor heavy. This morning the path will be dry.

Pulling into the trailhead parking lot, joined now by the pre-dawn light slowly growing from the east, placing my running bag in the trunk, my wallet and cellphone in the double-secret super-duper hiding place in my car, loading up my gels, my running hat on my head and sunglasses resting on the brim of the hat, running ID on my shoe, water bottle in my hand, watch set to go, I walk the few strides onto the

path, car fob safely in its pocket after locking the car. I turn onto the path, easing into a warm up jog. It's go time.

The run will be three hours or 19 miles, whichever comes first. But there's more. The first 1.5 miles are the warm up prelude done in a gentle pace. The finding of my rhythm, readying myself for the good of the longer run. Pausing after the warmup, suck down the first gel, the pressing of the interval button on my running watch sets the rest of the run in motion. The next 16 miles will be a blend of the first quarter mile of each mile run at marathon pace, the next three-quarter of a mile at marathon pace plus 45 seconds, each mile run into the next, the only breaks to refill my water bottle. I don't waste my runs on this path.

Why this planned run, why is it run on this morning, and, why can this possibly any fun. Good questions for which I have better answers.

I'm old enough as both a man and a runner that I know who I am and what I want. Competing is my sociological DNA. As a kid, in high school, college, grad school, my profession, and everything in between, I thought I was competing against others. I now know better; I'm competing for and against myself, the rest be damned. Doesn't matter to me what Charlie or Charlene accomplish. I'm excited for them, but their accomplishments having nothing to do with me. I seek perfection, settling for worthwhile life's experience, instead. Who I am is a man who treats my actions as play. Otherwise, what's the point.

What I want from my running is to qualify and run Boston. Not every year, just the years I choose, which only seem like every year. I've been chasing qualifying for the Boston Marathon since I was 19. I've even succeeded in both qualifying and running Boston seven times over that time span: in my late 20's, early to mid-30's, late 50's, and now in my mid-60's (in my 40's I was playing baseball). I blame Frank Shorter winning the gold medal in Munich, Bill Rodgers for making Boston cool, and my own competitiveness, no matter my age.

Coming of age long after the Boston Athletic Association began the qualifying standards for me to get into the marathon, learning that qualifying required more of me than merely wishing, I floundered, languished, and failed. Persistence I have and that is as necessary as learning how to train to run in a marathon different from Boston to qualify to race at Boston. Marathons in Seattle, Seaside, Sacramento,

Huntsville, Geneva, Milwaukee, Twin Cities, York, Indianapolis, Honolulu, Dallas, Carson City, San Diego, Greenbriar, South Haven, Tucson, Canton, all led to Boston. One way or another.

I read. I read for my profession. I read for my running. I put both into practice. I rehearse for both. All that practical practice lends itself to a rhythm in the exercise of performance. Just as a banker keeps longer hours than banker's hours, time utilized to be better at what I do requires far more discipline than what I produce on race day. Rhythm, among other definitions, is the systematic arrangement of synchronized movement. Running is the efficient stride at a practiced pace for a sustained period of time. Without rhythm you teach yourself, the effort is lacking.

So, I'm on the path, running at 5:30 a.m., clicking mile after mile at predetermined paces, each mile a distinct universe from the others, my mind focused on that mile, that time interval, that change in pace, my silently acknowledging the cooling leaf-cover from the trees, the gentle waterflow from the river aside me, decidedly waving to the other runners, cyclists, and pedestrians I pass. Feeling the cool of the early dawn giving way to the warming of the air, eventually the air getting its fill of water vapor, I am looking for that rhythm of a good run I know so well.

Running fast like the younger me just isn't going to happen. Winning is no longer achievable for me. Trinkets, medals, trophies, and the like rarely catch my attention. Despite what feels like sub-5:00 pace is so much slower now. But I enjoy racing and hanging onto the faster runners around me. And I love the running for itself. Racing, win or lose, develops rhythm. Internal toughness comes from racing and from training on mornings such as this one. I need that rhythm to be there, or Boston is just a wish.

At the end of mile 17.5, I realize I've just run 15 seconds per mile faster than I had expected. Cruising at the same speed for my "cool down", I had my rhythm. I soloed this run. I put myself out to the universe, as mom would say, and I had my answer. I had run smoothly, comfortably, and, dare I say, in rhythm. That wasn't just in my head. Being the flower blooming the forest unseen is not a loss; not blooming is the loss. Now I need to find a marathon. Boston is close.

But first, I went in search of a really good beer.