

Purpose

His hips slightly disjointed with each determined step forward, he walks with purpose, his head tilted downwards, his eyes always looking forward, sharp in focus, his arm carry that of a runner. his ankles stiffen with each foot landing onto the asphalt path. Following the foot landing, his knees barely bend in support of the bodily shift from the prior step to this one. His hips adjust more than they support his steps. Down the gentle hill he goes.

He walks with purpose. His route will take him down the hill, onto the main bike path, with a veer into the high school, before returning to the path, the reverse of the hill, and to the finish in his neighborhood. I've seen him walk this route over the last several years. Given that I run my loop once a week on different days of the work week, and that I've seen him walking on each of those days on any given week, his route is his morning habit.

Running past him on the long, gentle downhill in my third mile of my eight-mile run, I clear my throat loud enough for him to hear, both announcing my approach and acknowledging his effort. "Good morning," I say just loud enough for him to hear but not so loud that he is startled from my sudden appearance and disappearance.

His head doesn't turn as I pass him on his left. His viewpoint pivots towards me. He acknowledges me with an ever so slight nod and his own greeting. "Good morning," he offers. "Almost done?" he inquires. Even gentlemen walkers offer short bits of conversation while on their route. "Another few miles to go," I reply, my pace taking me quickly past him.

He appears to be a man of a certain age, somewhere in his 80's. as our society would say of him, he's earned the right to exercise in his own style. That thought does him a disservice. We all have earned the right to exercise or not, to run, or walk, or cycle, swim, play pool, bowl, or vegetate. What he has earned, his life's experience gives him: his give a damn what others think is busted. On this warm, early summer morning just after dawn, he's on his walking route. The fact that I am running is of no matter.

His satisfaction from his focused walk reflects his self-discipline. His daily accomplishment in starting his walk, no matter the weather or the season, and his

completing his route is a triumph of will overcoming age. Aging as runners, the child runs with all her might to exhaustion without care of fatigue, rests a moment, and then repeats her effort. The young adult runs smoothly, no body aches, knowing this feeling of power will never end. Our middle-aged selves nurture our bodies, stretching our limbs, practicing strength training, doling out the powerful efforts in between easy runs, controlling ourselves. The elderly runner accomplishes the task slowly, finding that a power walk with a constant shuffle is best suited for the achievement.

This man of a certain age, with his discipline, his clear determination, and his daily results, competes only against himself, though his walks are not how he would define competition. He knows how he feels when he returns home, his walk completed. He feels the energy surging through his body, giving him the mental and physical fuel to enjoy the remainder of his day. Endorphins are our friends.

Later, miles further into my run, passing the high school on the student parking lot side, I spy him walking the student parking lot. His pace still a determined shuffle, arms still raised, head remaining downwards, he traverses the lot, striding from one parking section and then back to the end of another, zig zagging the lot's entirety. My own pace catches him just starting from the north side of the lot: he walks a straight line to the far end, turns right, comes back down to the near side of the lot, turns left to the next row, repeating this up and back six times before reaching the end of the lot.

I've seen him walk in this parking lot every time I've run in the same general area, I know he walks just under one mile to the high school, a half mile in the lot, before returning to his neighborhood. The fact that his walk with purpose consumes as much of his day as my eight-miler consumes mine is of no consequence to him. I'm merely an anecdotal memory to his routine.

Having seen him walking his route, his athletic DNA within his stride shows itself. He walks with ease, with power, his body held erect, his cadence in rhythm. His fitness shows in his consistent pace. His is comfortable in his solo effort. Age may have slowed his pace, stiffening his gait, but the repeated practice from his younger self augers well for his current effort. Internally, he knows his expected pace, executing it with vigor in completing his course.

We learn our own pace through consistent repetition. Every day we head out the door, we teach ourselves the pacing that becomes the foundation for our runs. We feel when we are pushing that internal pace and we are running slower than the expected tempo. Innately, we find running faster than the usual pace to exhilarate us, raising our own expectations. We also learn that the internal clock slows the further from our youth we age. But that slowing is not from lack of effort.

We simply slow. The effort isn't any the less. In fact, we learn that pushing the effort does not gain us any additional speed from younger days. That concerted effort merely tires us without any increase in our usual pacing. We adapt. We slow our daily pace. We lower our expectation for our runs, the realization that we cannot maintain the speed of our younger self settling into our efforts.

His walk demonstrates his acceptance of his own reality; he can walk a long time at a pace he wouldn't have recognized many decades before. His walk is his alone. There is no one striding alongside him, offering conversation that softens the sharpness of the walk. Yet another sign of age. It's not that he desires the isolation as his desire of company is rarely met for a man of a certain age.

Living life means addressing constant change. Reaching an age where we no longer try to keep up with social changes, caught up in the past unique to our life's experience, we instinctively hold onto what we know. What we know is life seems faster, society less inclined to consider us important, friends reduced drastically in number. We find a means to rise above. We walk. We read. We listen. We learn. We learn to assert more control in our lives.

He walks. If he could, he'd run. If he could run, he would disregard the pace. At first. If were able to run consistently, he'd notice his pace. If he noticed his pace, he'd subconsciously improve that pace. If he improved his pace, he'd look around to others who are running, determining whether he could keep up. If you give a mouse a cookie.

Instead, he walks. He knows the effort to extend on this warm, sultry morning. He knows he will be passed by runners like me. In turn, he will pass dog walkers and others walking slowly enough to survive the morning's weather. He will not see others who walk with purpose. There are fewer of those walkers than there are runners on the bike path running slowly. Fewer still run fast. He walks watching his

step, maintaining balance, feeling the smoothness of his experienced stride. Focus on his progress garners him more satisfaction than watching over others around him.

My seven years running my weekly loop, seeing him consistently walking at the same points of my many turns, led me to ponder his exercise choice. I may be running my loop, but my thoughts are most likely no different than his while he is walking. He strides down the trail while I circle the apartment complex before heading down the hill. He begins his parking lot circuit while I push up the bike path before returning back to the lot on my way to my final loop in an adjoining neighborhood. He heads up the hill, in the shade, just as I return to the path to my finish. There's not a whole lot of difference, other than pace.

Time I now take to run on this morning would have been double in distance a couple of decades ago. I am rapidly approaching becoming a man of a certain age, with fewer friends, even fewer running partners, a much slower pace in an ever faster paced society, letting go of the extraneous to hold onto that which is of import to me. On the mornings I see him when I run this loop, the thoughts of perseverance by aging comes to the fore. If he can maintain his dignity in walking his route, I can accomplish the same in running. He seemingly has a purpose to his daily life; I can only aspire to the same.