

My Version

A single mother of a boy and a girl in the 1960's was worried that her two children were displaying personality traits that would adversely affect them in the future. She called on her friends for what steps she could take to ensure each child was not in need of special care. She was told a visit to a psychiatrist would do the trick in assisting in making that determination. Or not.

One after-school day, the children were driven to a place foreign to them. They were brought into a pleasant-looking waiting room in a nice, single-story business office in a quiet part of town. They were introduced to a very kind gentleman who asked the two children questions about themselves, their likes and dislikes, and so on. He then asked them to follow him from his office, telling them on the way that they would each get their own room, full of different things, and that they could play in their separate rooms for as long as they wanted.

One child was led to step into a room with light streaming into it from large windows to the outside. Once the door closed, the child noticed all the toys. Toys with which to build, to hold, to jump, to throw. There were books to read, to color, to make shapes, to create. There was food, including sandwiches, cupcakes and other desserts, candies of all kinds. There was a soft, big, cozy chair by the large window in which to sit.

One child was led to step into a foul-smelling room with only a tiny window to the outside. Once the door was closed, the child realized the room was filled with horse manure, coming almost to the child's neck. The child also noticed a shovel stuck into the middle of the manure pile.

After a time, the gentleman and the mother opened the door to the first room, finding that nothing in the room had been touched, not the toys, or the books, or even the food. They found the child in the middle of the room, crying. Asked why, the tearful child offered that there was so much in the room, the child didn't know where to start.

After a time, the gentleman and the mother opened the door to the second room, hearing a digging sound from inside the room, seeing a shovel going into the manure pile before its being lifted to move a portion of the pile. When asked why the child

was shoveling the manure, the child replied that because there was so much manure, there had to be a pony in the room somewhere. I'll let you determine what all that means.

I raced a 5km yesterday, in a time that I think is my slowest race time, ever. That's 47 years of ever. In hindsight, the flat, fast course was not that. The course was an out and back on a bike path that included what is called the "ditch" late in the first mile that was a 12-degree grade down to the river and back up, all within 200 or so yards, so steep that I had to throw my weight back as far as I could on the downhill, "fuck, fuck, fuck" coming out of my mouth, because I was very much afraid of falling, again. The uphill was no better, as I can no longer run even slowly up a steep hill.

The first and third miles were the same, so I had the racing pleasure of repeating my initial experience a second time on the way back. But for the ditch, the middle mile would have been fun because it was a series of left hand turns in a quiet neighborhood. I survived the race, which is reflected in my finishing time. I was slow and getting slower. Because I knew I would not receive a trinket for placing in my age group, I changed into dry clothing and located breakfast and a latte.

That the weather was well below freezing and the windchill was colder than that and the wind blew the frigid air incessantly were not excuses. All the runners faced the same elements and delt with the same ditch, twice. Hell, I train in that weather just for days like this when I can race. Winter running is a challenge. It's a challenge I take on because there is no alternative if I want to run.

In the race was a woman who is in her 60's. Over the last decade, I've noticed her at the same local races I've entered. She wears matching race outfits, long colorful tights with identical long-sleeved shirts in the winter, and colorful shorts with matching singlets in the summer races. Her husband apparently does not run, but he comes to every race that she enters. Prior to this winter, I would pass her after the first mile of any race of any distance in which we were both entered. Now, I can't stay even with her, much less finish in front of her. Good for her.

What aggravates me is that my race pace from yesterday was slower than when I run a tempo-paced run on my own. What further infuriates me is running a straight line on the race course without being tripped, shoved, or jostled takes up so much of my mental energy I have no mental space remaining for racing. I focus on keeping my

left shoe from scuffing my right, not allowing my inner ankle bones to touch, and keeping my inner knees from striking one another, or my left leg and my right leg from meandering into the other's dance space. Sort of defeats the purpose, don't you think.

Arthritis in either hip has been ruled out, as has a neurological disconnect to my hips, knees, ankles, legs, or any other aspect of the physiology of running. Through over two years of physical therapy, I've strengthened all the parts of me that needed attention. The running is worse. How worse? My last good race was two years ago, a 15km in which each 5km split was four minutes faster than what I gave myself yesterday. I've become that doddering old guy who looks good in his racing kit, appearing the part of a veteran runner, who cannot run.

Next weekend, I am entered into another 5km race. this one is in a local state park, is not flat, the course being a loop with a sort of a tail, and there are no "ditches". The temperature at race time is projected to be 30 degrees warmer than yesterday. The evergreen-filled forest will buffer any sustained wind. And, the start time is 11:15 a.m., after the half marathon starts, a half marathon I used to run in under 8:00 pace just three years ago. Now, I might finish that distance before sundown.

In the late 70's, when I began distance running, the race choices were mainly 10km races and marathons, with an occasional half marathon and even more occasional 5km race distance. By the 90's the choices had become 5km's and marathons now accompanied by more half marathons and even more 5kms. Now, I found very few 10km races, but more than enough 5kms, just as many half marathons, and the ubiquitous marathons. Any given weekend in any month of the year, there is a 5km for some medically-related cause, or religious-based charity, to support a local park, cause, or school, or to celebrate a large happening. I want a race whose sole purpose is to encourage runners to run. You know, like the basis for races used to be run.

Actually, next weekend's races are part of a bigger series of races held in the state parks over the span of a few months. The race fees are low with the proceeds given directly to the state park system. The state parks are each beautiful. Next weekend's race also happens to be next to my town. And, the usual race shirt is this year a white hoody with advertisements other than the race logo. I like wearing white. While I don't need a new race shirt, gifting away more than I keep, an advertise-absent white

hoodie is cool. That does mean another sweatshirt needs to go. I've reached the age of purging what I won't wear.

I enjoy racing. It's in my running DNA. I am from the age of racing. I read the chapter from the early testament and wrote portions of the new one. There were years in my running path that included 10kms and marathons with lots of both. There were years along that same path that I raced many times in distances below 10kms and marathons. There were years when I raced only half marathons with just a few marathons tossed in. Never was there a year without a race.

The pursuit of the race calendar, be it local, regional, or national, is a wonderful pastime. What once required filling out a registration by hand, writing out the check to cover the race fee, and mailing in the envelope in time to be included in the race is now replaced with online autofill for both the personal information and the race-fee payment. The resulting line in the sand is the same.

Not that I need one, but registering for a race is an additional reason to go out the door for a run. Any run. Otherwise, the meaning of a run is lessened. There is a rhythm to running. Some runs are short and easy. Others are just the opposite. There are runs that include segments that are fast followed by slow recovery. Others are simple runs of time or distance duration. Still other runs are long and slow or long and not slow. But when I add that I have a race upcoming, each run has a different focus. Especially when there is a 5km race twice a month.

Five decades of running hasn't lessened my enjoyment of training through track repeats, faster-paced tempo runs with running friends, pushing the pace on my favorite courses – favorite for the obvious that I can go fast – and running for the pure enjoyment of running along a river bike path or in a quiet neighborhood or in a park full of trees, nature's sounds, and laughter.

And while race expectations are high only to be crushed by reality, I still expect results. These days, I feel the adrenalin in the build up to the race and then lose it almost immediately after passing the start line. Too much personal monkey business going on in my head over the rebellion in my stride. I just don't like the results obtained. Yet, throughout all that manure I pile on myself, there's a fast result just waiting for me to find it.