

Careful for What You Wish

He was one tight turn from descending to the bridge. Running at full speed, downhill, on a single-track coastal desert dirt trail, softened by the passing eons of time. This was the technical portion of the return and the scariest. His ability gave him the ego to push the fast pace through the suddenly rock-strewn section of the main path. His Spidey-sense told him to slow down. He was approaching the bridge.

The “bridge” consisted of two wood planks, tied together, stretching over the narrow deep gully below, connecting opposite sides of the gully allowing hikers, runners, and mountain bikers a short crossing to traverse without the necessity of using a longer higher route in avoiding the gully. But crossing over the bridge challenged anyone moving faster than a gentle walk.

The bridge came just before the first mile mark on the return back to the trailhead after reaching the highest point on the out-and-back course, that being the local park with a water fountain on the far side of the soccer field. After pushing the pace on the 3.5-mile soft dirt path in the dry air of the coastal valley, the ascent gradually increasing in steepness until the last challenging mile, the water fountain was the excuse to pause and refresh before pushing off back from where he came, at a much faster pace.

The approach heading downwards was steep enough that the constant thought was to ease up in stepping onto and along the double-plank bridge. The uphill approach on the way up to the “summit” was easy because the pace was slower. Downhill? Not so much when the running pace kicks in. The bridge crossing was one of those moments when he trusted his athletic ability in prancing to, over, and beyond the bridge in carrying his pace.

Downhill striding along the gently curving path from a gradual descent changing suddenly, swiftly, to a short, very steep drop onto a flat bridge before one leap off the bridge back into the gradual descent required one foot plant into the soft coastal dirt before a small leap onto the bridge. This time, his eyes spotted a large, oversized rock – or small boulder, you pick – on his right. Planting his right shoe into the side of the rock, leaping onto the bridge with his left leg leading, crossing the bridge fell into the rhythm of the descent. Striking into the gully’s opposite bank, he seamlessly emerged from the moment, destined towards the trail’s end.

In the short few years I resided in the Southern California coastal county, I probably ran that canyon trail at least once monthly, excluding the many variations run on the myriad trails off shooting from the main trail. But it was the main trail I eventually settled upon as my go-to route. Challenging all the way up from the trailhead before sumitting 3.5 miles later and delightfully giving back on the return. The rhythm in churning upwards on long, wide dirt path, smooth to the step, with wide winding curves taking me around small hills, through tiny canyons formed by a long bluff on the east and the small hills dotting the west, dotted by pop-up copse of woods along the way, each distinct from one another, combined for the perfect visual backdrop for running.

There was the mile-long warmup along the narrow dirt path alongside the paved road to the start of the canyon trail, followed by the sharp right turn onto the path leading into the dense desert foliage fed by a stream that almost always appeared to have more mud than water, leading to a long slight incline with another right turn over a pedestrian-style bridge avoiding the mud below, before the path turned me to the left and into an everchanging wide-track trail snaking its way upwards, always upwards, each passing half-mile leaning into a steeper ascent than the half-mile previous, all leading to the hairpin turn into the bridge up a steep quarter mile through a trailhead, and beyond to the steepest final uphill to the park which was my summit.

And the silence, in which I heard only my foot strike into the coastal desert floor, the birds singing to one another, and the air passing along my ears, all the while my eyes darting for locational clues in marking my progress. Invariably, I ran the canyon trail solo, after having learned of its existence from a friend. I was Sunday morning long run kind of guy, and this route became that morning's run. It was also the last, most perfect run.

7 a.m. on a Sunday in late July, just a week before the move to the other side of the Country. Lacing up my shoes, I knew this was my last time running in the canyon. A marine layer had descended upon the coast and into the canyon. Greeting me at the start of this run was an air temperature in the mid-60's that lasted over the entirety of my morning run, the air full of coastal moisture. The morning was perfect for launch.

Leaving my car at a park further away from the trailhead, I had a two-mile jog on a different paved running path joining with the narrow roadside dirt path leading onto

the canyon trail. The quicker than usual warmup pace influenced what transpired the rest of that run. 7:45 per mile was the overall pace for the morning's run, including the easy-paced warmup and cooldown. That would miss the point. This run became about how fast could I run up the canyon and how much faster could I run descending back to the trailhead. This was my last shot at glory, personal only to me.

My pace accelerating onto the spongy coastal desert dirt, running quicker than I had ever run through the river-drenched foliage, turning to and easing over the first bridge, I felt my pace lock in. instinctively, I knew that should I keep the pace, I was in for a runner's treat.

Successful distance running is finding that happy meeting of effort matching current ability, relaxed stride while maintaining the effort, and the joy in the effort, all to achieve the moment when effort becomes a steady state running at pace. A groove in the moment. Easy to state, more difficult to achieve.

I had hit my groove. Flowing in stride on the dirt path softened by erosion and use, I passed each of my mental checkpoints faster than I had ever done before. Past the double boulder trail fork, through a copse of woods I always found mysterious, into the only woods section of the trail, running the chicane created by the cyclists, onto the bridge leading to the final steepest part of the way up. All the way up, from the imperceptible beginning of the incline gently leading me to the steeper final mile, I felt strong, breathing comfortably, feeling the runner's rhythm in the graceful foot touch onto the ground prodded by the opposite arm's directive, leading to the other foot's touch and spring. A runner's dance.

Getting a groove requires running, running consistently, consistent running as a normal part of daily life, such running becoming routine rather than the exception to every day living. Brushing teeth, the first cup of coffee, the work commute, the daily run, all work together. The difference between each of our daily activities is that running is the one leading to daydreaming the run, flitting moments of planning the run, anticipating the feeling of the run, the expectation of the run.

This day's run was different. I knew the mile marker, one through three, and I knew that summiting was another half-mile further. The mile splits on my second edition GPS watch told me what I knew. 7:08, 7:07, 7:35, 4:32, were the uphill splits. I was 48 years old. Before that summer, I hadn't run that fast since my late 30's. Those

same splits were a minute or more faster than any previous run. On the way down, the times in reverse were 3:51, 6:27, 6:35, 5:58, for the win. The dance on the descent was without flaw. Each downwards step from the summit down the steepest mile onto the canyon floor to the trailhead was a study in leaping without effort, barely touching the dirt beneath each running step, seemingly without a breath of the marine layer moistened air being consumed.

That morning's run was more intense, the lungs, the heart, the muscles, and the brain showing off their choreographed adaptation to the prior training pace, pace fast enough in satisfying the need for more. For a moment in my time, I was that flower growing in the woods, unnoticed and unseen. That run was awesomely glorious. 20 years later, at the right moment, I take myself back to that run.

Now, I relate to Charlie Gordon's plight in *Flowers for Algernon*; he "wantd to lern more even then pepul who are smarter," and I so much want the feeling in running that kept me running almost half a century.

I am not ignorant of the fact that at my age medicinal support is now a necessary component in regaining and maintaining my quality of life. More simply put, I am now a pill swallower, needle injection pusher, each regulated by consistent blood draws and medical specialist appointments. All I am missing is a body-part replacement turning me into the bionic man. While I mentally pretend I a remain on the path to good health, quality living, and sharpness of mind, that mind game is the shiny gloss over the ongoing situational strife in keeping my life.

My quality of life, now hinging on medicine in tricking my brain that my thyroid remains active, testosterone replacement therapy for replicating my hemoglobin, inducing my pancreas to release insulin in controlling my type 2 diabetes, my statin use encouraging the required cholesterol level, is likened to my traversing that bridge on the downhill descent to the canyon floor. Choosing my steps wisely, knowing that I'm trusting in making the choice without blinking, I move forward. Each step pushes me forward, the step after reliant on that prior step. None of this is profound. Successful living is in the consistency of adapting. The steps I take now lead me steps I take in my future. Let's continue with baby step, shall we.