

Circles

(Oh, this will be a fun topic.)

For over seven years, I had the same view out of my three almost floor to ceiling windows, overlooking the office complex parking lot to a busy thoroughfare adjacent to the office complex, just further out to a tree-filled and grass-covered park, leading the constant movement of the not too distant freeway beyond which was the suburb's business center. Over those years, that view was my muse at work when deep thought was required. Now so far removed from that suburban locale, I miss the view, not the job.

One morning, in the seventh month of my sixth year in the same office, looking out towards the distant downtown, tears flowed uninterrupted, leading to silent sobs, gasps of air, finalizing in a feeling of loss. I had no warning, just immense sadness. Ignoring the messages on my computer, my office door shut, I mentally crawled into myself. Following several hours of this occurrence, a longtime friend called me, momentarily breaking through my unexplained pain.

Clinical depression is a mood disorder causing a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest, affecting how you feel, think and behave, leading to a variety of emotional and physical problems, including interfering in normal day-to-day activities, sometimes leading to the feeling that life isn't worth living. Fortunately for me, I wasn't that far along. Turned out my friend, listening to me describe my emotional state, confided to me that she had suffered clinical depression and that with medication and psychotherapy, she was better. So, I accomplished the same result, but it took time.

Part of my recovery was self-prescribed therapy in resuming running, something that I had neglected for several months, the out-of-sync brain waves overwhelming any activities leading to joy. Every run was done alone, somewhere semi-isolated, allowing me to cry while I ran. The initial short runs lead to longer runs, each of the runs accompanied by tears streaming down my face, gulps of air keeping me moving. Each run was awful as much as necessary in my recovering and moving away from my personal medical malady. Then a running friend called me, demanding I join him on the midweek group run nearby.

Almost every Wednesday night, we ran a five-mile loop through the neighborhoods of the upscale town next to our town, running at his pace, under the streetlights of winter, and the late sun of summer, just two runners of over 100 running the same loop before adjoining for pizza and beer. Eventually, we decided to run the loop in reverse, because we could, upsetting other runners' applecart's in the process. In so doing, we avoided the crowd at the start, intersecting with the throng well after the crowd had thinned, allowing us to carry on a running conversation. One December night, we froze ourselves to pain, but that's for a different time.

My grit and determination, along with medication and therapy, assisted in my moving forward from my depression, but his initial mandate that I join him for the weekly runs was equally as effective for me. His friendship and seemingly laissez faire approach to my illness was soothing in a way I appreciated. That we ran a pace slower than I would normally run on my own, or with others faster than he, was never a consideration. I had a running therapist and used that avenue to advantage. Wednesday after work, 6 p.m. start, finish by 6:45, change into dry clothing, order a pint, and an extra-large pizza to share with others from the run. That just never got old.

I became his wing man whenever we ran on those Wednesday night runs or any other run. With him I ran his pace, ran his routes with him. Because of him, I learned that in a group run setting, the slowest runner is never left alone. Always check in on those in the group to make certain they are part of the group run, not simply left to fend for themselves. Runs with more than two runners requires that no one runs alone for the entirety of the run. Other runs at other times may be for pushing the pace, solo or in a pack.

On an occasional weekend run along the wide dirt trails leading up and around the Mount prevailing over our region, we'd be joined by another friend leading up to steep fire trails and down into the canyons. He was talented and relentless in pushing the inclines and descending into the brush. Being a wingman, I ran alongside my slower friend, who trudged up and down, getting through the hilly dirt course he enjoyed. Our faster friend took to running ahead, zig zagging to a point, jogging back to us, before turning around to run further ahead before again zig zagging back to us. Laughingly we threatened to leave him for the buzzards if he didn't stop, but he reminded us, from a distance, that we had to catch him first. The after-run brunch conversation always led off with the never ending threat from us. We had friends.

Much of my running career, I've run solo in my weekday training, not so much because I wanted to run solo, as I ran when my family and work schedule permitted. Meeting up at 4 a.m., at an arbitrary lunch time, or breaking early from work do not lend themselves to running with others. Weekday runs take on the personality of a work day in that, the run is pre-determined, the effort pre-programmed, and the result is expected. Running is a disciplined addition to a structured lifestyle within a societal flow.

Adding a running partner to a weekday, workday run adds flavor to the day. You now answer another person, to the schedule upon which you've agreed, to the pace negotiated, and the tacit agreement to run together. Finding the running partner willing to accept each of those same requirements and agreements is a challenge. When you happen upon such a willing runner, you add them happily into the fold of your life. For me, such runners are few.

The weekend run is different. You happen upon a training group willing to accept you because your pace matches theirs. More importantly, your personality doesn't grate on them and in return, you accept them individually and collectively. A long run takes a long time over a long distance by definition. Myriad topics arise, with an equal number of opinions, insight, and humor. Those runners you cherish in an entirely different way than your family, your work friends, and your people.

This weekend, some 30 years later, one of our local running group came to the morning's long run with a nagging hip issue, causing him to start the run at a cautious pace, all of his Spidey senses zeroed in on how he felt, coaxing himself to complete the 12-mile loop. For much of the first nine miles, I ran with him. In his staying with me, not attempting to push his pace in reeling in the leaders, he tacitly acknowledged that my company was more important than the pace. We happily ran on, his hip pain lessening, my pace matching his.

On this run this morning, because he had to slow down from his usually faster running pace than I could handle, I had someone with whom I would share the effort in holding pace, discuss current events, exchange recipes, and generally enjoy running with a friend. Not once did he lament his slow pace. Instead, we increased our pace with each passing mile, using the synergy we created, stride for stride along the hilly route.

The leader on our run used the first half of the route in accelerating ahead of the two of us, circling back to rejoin us, before again accelerating ahead of us before again returning to us. I'd already seen this movie. Several miles into the route, having set the morning run's pattern, she asked cautiously as to whether we were accepting her numerous bungy cord-like accelerations, because she wanted to get in 13 miles instead of just 12. I said it was not a problem and he responded that her adding distance in this manner didn't affect him whatsoever. She babysat the two of us through the route's halfway point, keeping her own pace while ensuring we remained in eyesight, before accelerating away for good. We mentally waved good bye, settling into our "slower" pace.

With three miles to the route's completion, I turned left, shortening my route by one mile, leaving him to enjoy his own, faster pace to the finish. My pace picked up, so much so that I was passing middle-aged women walking in the middle of the bike path, passing gentlemen walking their dogs in the middle of the path, and other unknown to me runners who hadn't thought they were running slowly along the same path.

My fastest two miles of the run were the last two, each more than a minute faster than the per mile pace for my first 10 miles. Shifting into fast run mode, my gait becoming smoother, I churned along the path, matching the many slight turns, adjusting for the imperceptible undulations, continually reaching for yet another gear. For the first time in a long while, I was running, not merely muscling my way through a run.

Not until I toweled off the sweat I had collected from the run did I realize I had not run alone. For the first time in almost two years, I was close enough to the rest of the group that the morning's lead runner could come back to join us before hightailing herself ahead of us. I wasn't merely waving good bye from the first step of the first mile. Like Seabisquit, I need to see a runner ahead to remain close. Losing sight of my group is no better than a solo run. I had forgotten how nice is the view from close range. Wouldn't my weekend run be more, much more, were I able to repeat this experience. Joy is not to be overlooked as a remedy to what ails me.