

## I am a Runner

4:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning. I wake up before my alarm goes off. I'm up, bed covers gently tossed to the bed's middle, my feet setting on the bedroom floor in sync with my body twisting itself into a standing position, which I hold just long enough to know that I am awake, that I know what I'm doing, and that I can move forward. I'm meeting with running friends for the weekend longer run in less than two hours' time, to be followed by the always rewarding post-run brunch.

Different weekend, same drill. Only this weekend predawn I am getting out of a strange bed in a rented bedroom that is part of an Airbnb/VRBO located in an unfamiliar city. I am there to run a race. I am the first one of our running group to awaken, which means I am in charge of brewing the coffee upon which we each rely. This is going to be an arduous morning excursion involving leaving the abode timely, arriving to the race location timely, locating the porta lets before race time, racing the hoped-for finishing time for the race, all followed by the post-race brunch or lunch, depending on the race length.

Four of five weekday workdays, I awaken before the sun stretches across the small lake just beyond our backyard, sensing the ducks, the geese in season, and the lone heron also stretching into their early morning routine. Drinking the leftover coffee from the day before while I brew a fresh pot to consume upon my return, checking the morning's weather, donning running attire appropriate to the weather, I gather the necessities for my weekday run to be done solo.

One morning run will be a short 45-50 minute run with quick bursts of effort each less than a quarter mile with shorter recoveries. Another run will be a steady pace for 90 minutes. Still a third will be short and easy for 45 minutes with no burst. The fourth will be another 90 minutes with longer stretches of long race pace segments repeated with short recoveries between each segment. As ingrained as the morning shower, the morning shave, the search for the work attire, so are these runs.

No other runner meets up with me for these runs before work. These runs are mine for my personal enjoyment and self-improvement. No shared stories on the run, no post run meet up for dining. Me. Me alone running, by myself, my feet moving in rhythm, my mind focused on the rhythmic movement. My running is never mindless,

its purpose for me clear with each step, the steps making up a segment, all the steps required in finishing a run. I am a runner.

I have the discipline of purpose. That we each have discipline is a lost thought for most of us. We see laziness and assume that those who are lazy have no discipline. The truth is found in the choice to be sloth like. The brain does not shut down because one decides to do very little physically. Continuous lounging on the couch requires constant thought. The effort to use no effort is exhausting, as is the inertia in ending the motionlessness.

The human body revels in motion. Move and the body initially stretches itself in response. Continue to move and the body finds the efficiency needed to achieve the most economical motion required. The practice of that continuous motion leads to the adaptation in effort, economy, and the mind's understanding of the body's movement. The internal joy of that movement is oftentimes what is overlooked. That the joy of movement is given short shrift can be seen in adults.

Children thrill themselves in racing down the hall of their home, running outside in playing a game with their friends, talking quietly to themselves in their made up world when playing out scenarios with their toys. A child with a doll, a toy animal, or a car, plane, or tea set. An adult cleaning a room in their home, clearing out a garage such that its contents may be rearranged, lawn mowing, shrub trimming, and the deadheading of flowers is the adult version of play. And, these games and chores must be done now. There is no time to waste.

Playtime does not always come with a smile and a laugh. Watch a child at play by themselves or with others to see their serious expressions. Catch the same expression in an adult working on their home or their hobby. The chosen activity is work in the form of play. The joy is in the motion required in conducting the action leading to the result, no matter the result. My creating this blogpost shows my seriousness of expression. Of course, there is no one to witness that sternness from the set eyes, the flatlined lips pressed slightly together, or the upright almost rigid posture in front of the monitor and above the keyboard.

As discussed above, that discipline is a practiced art is lost on all of us to some degree. But, when we take a moment in reflecting on our task, we inherently and subconsciously accept that we want to excel in that task. Dust the casing above the

door jam. Clean the garage floor in the fall so that it isn't harder to clean come spring. It's not that we do something right that it doesn't have to be redone. Life's lessons teach us to set to the task so that it will be easier than before the next time.

Five decades running consistently has taught me all of those things. However, I don't conflate why I run with the discipline I've brought to my running or that running has expanded and focused my discipline. Why I run is not a part of the discipline of my running. Getting out the door to run each day merely gets me to where I want to be, which is my own space, engaging in what I enjoy. Running.

The joy of running is that it can be done anywhere. Much like a Dr. Seuss book, running can be on a road, flat, hilly, winding, or windy. Or, on a school track devoid of anyone else. Or, on a path along a canal, river, lake, or ocean. Even on a treadmill when the weather outside necessitates that surface. Merely pick a direction or a purpose and take the first step.

The pleasure in running is that process of following the first step with the next step for as long as I want to run that day. Maybe today is to that distant tree and back. Perhaps I'll run around that tree, exploring the neighborhoods beyond. I predetermine my run route. Route running is an acquired skill, much like wood finishing. I "discovered" the neighborhood, with its neighborhood pool parking lot, its quiet streets and homes to run over and past. I expanded my range, running to and through an adjoining neighborhood, furthering the distance run. That I have more than several such routes is the joy of variety.

Variety in the running process works with consistency in running. There is no need to run every day. Studies show running every day of the week leads to regression in improvement, i.e., you take a step back. Running every other day works, as long as you run every other day without skipping one of the runs because . . . things happen. However a runner defines consistent running for them is their unique definition for consistency. I like roasted Brussel sprouts with a bit of a drizzled dressing. You don't. more for me.

My own consistency can be found in my choosing to run five or six days a week for five decades. That makes me consistent. That makes me old. Just as we learn in our work life that not every closed door meeting involving our superiors has anything to do with us, no one cares whether I've ever run, much less that in fact, I've run

somewhere in the close neighborhood of 100,000 miles. Pointedly, those are my miles, logged into both my running logs and in my brain. When I was younger, I had that invincible feeling that I would always be faster than most, stronger than most, finishing ahead of most. I was a yoot.

Now, I'm that guy. No. Now, I'm that old guy who runs, impressing no one, not even myself. When I go for a run, I block out any memory of being enough of a serious runner that racing and placing mattered. No longer am I physically gifted in flourishing from my training to be relevant to anyone but me.

What I know now is that running is my DNA. I breathe, so I run. I think, so I run. I am, so I run. I suffer through overheated runs in the hot and humid summers. I suffer through the frozen runs in the cold and dry winters. I pace myself through long runs, thinking the discipline to run for three hours will result in a better marathon. I repeat short segments with a break between each, thinking that that disciplined approach will result in faster race times. While each these things were once true for me, time has passed those thoughts onto others much younger than myself.

Yet, I am a runner. A runner runs. No matter that I am slow. No matter that for most of each week, I run alone. Running solo lets me into my world of play that I am not slow. I patiently catalog my progress running against myself. I push myself. I revel in my internalized success. Running quickly over a set course or repeatedly over a set segmented distance, followed by doing the same two weeks later, is reward enough. On the weekend group run, or from a race finish, I am more than aware I am now slow; the swift younger me long gone.

Another word for discipline is habit. I am not yet dead so I might as well continue to run. The predawn alarm doesn't disturb my wife. My Goldilocks rustling for the day's proper running attire is a game unto itself. Tracking the mileage of my running shoes chosen for this day is borderline obsessive, just as is a farmer's tracking the weather in winter. Picking the day's running route, chosen based on the run's purpose, the timing of that purpose, the conduciveness of the weather in achieving that purpose, is of great and grave importance. Starting the run rises above all.

Today is a rest day. It is a gray, cool day, the first of many to come. I will go out in weather like this, no matter the pace or result. A bad day of running is only less good than a good one. There is a thin line between discipline, effort, consistency, and joy.