

Bottomless

In the sunless cool of midafternoon, the two of us began yet another kilometer repeat on a grass hill in the regional park overlooking the lake behind us and the zoo to the west. The ground hardscaped from eons of endless rain fall, our singletrack dirt trail etched from generations of hikers, pedestrians, and runners, led us initially over the humps, short inclines to the crest of one small hill after another, leading to an easy flow downhill to the base of the next hump. Coming off the base of the final hump, we would follow the trail's hard left towards the road adjoining the park, veering again into a hard left skirting the humps now to our left, the ground gently undulating back to the soccer field, the repeat finish just on the edge of the field's far endline.

The two of us walking our own distinct small circles, waiting for the two-minute rest period's end, he looked at me asking, "how much lunch did you have?" I know he was asking me because I had just 45 minutes before we met up to begin our pre-arranged run over to the park for the repeats, chowed down. A stacked sandwich, potato salad, bags of chips, an apple, a mandarin, cookies to taste, was my lunch. On less than an hour's recovery, we hit our jaunt pace beginning the workout. I felt full, like a bear who'd hit paydirt with a garbage can. Our repeat pace suffered. That's why he asked the rhetorical question.

A mere chuckle was my retort. We'd just finished our sixth of ten kilometer repeats over the humps. With two minute's rest, our usual repeat times were just under or just over three minutes. Our first six today were just over or just under fifteen seconds slower. Lining up for our seventh effort, I quickly glanced his way, let out a quiet but firm burp, and headed down the first hump. I could tell from his pushing to keep in front of me that entire loop that he expected either that I would pass him, or, that I'd throw up near him. I accomplished neither. The final three repeats were going to be faster, more closely resembling our usual pacing. And no, I never threw up, thank you.

Following the finish of our workout, jaunting back to our meet up place, we passed our favorite soda fountain, with the best chocolate malteds. Inquiring whether he wanted to stop, order a malt, and walk the rest of the way back, he turned down my offer. Initially. I offered to pay. His declination was short lived. Devouring our respective malts, I declared being runners in our 20's was great, because we could eat to our content. He responded with a large, long, distinct belch.

Four decades later, the week before Thanksgiving week, the empty nesters are vacationing with the in laws in a cabin cottage in the mountains. The stay includes breakfast brought to our cottage every morning, after we choose from the menu that changes daily. The others pick one main course, along with juice and a breakfast bread. We have our own coffee. I choose two main courses each morning. Consistently, I ordered an egg-heavy entrée, as in an omelet or such, along with flap jacks or French toast or waffles. There was fruit, bacon – no grits, thank gawd – and always the breakfast bread that no one else would touch. I was not cheated.

Upon the first morning's breakfast delivery from the main Inn, the others are aghast not only over the amount I've ordered, but my immediate consumption of "all that food." This same reaction was repeated at each morning's meal. I consumed while they talked. I cleaned their plates of untouched food while they spoke to one another. I finished off all the breads while they bantered about the morning. We all cleaned up the dining room and left for the day's adventure. Those were good days.

The dinners were both away from the mountainside Inn and more of the same, with my ordering more than the others could consume, combined, and always with a dessert. With much subtle, and not so subtle, discussion of my dining habits, as though I weren't present, I subtly reminded the "family" that I consumed more than each of them because of a high metabolism and because I remained an avid practitioner of now almost daily running. The quality of the cuisine was always more important than quantity. But, when I could have both, I would head that way.

We walked, a lot, during that trip, from one artist's retail store to another. We viewed canvas art, pottery art, blown glass art, antiques, mountain stuff, and bear-related art. We saw local cartesian work at its finest. We saw bears. I did not dabble in consuming food between the late breakfasts and the early dinners. I didn't suffer. There is dining and then there is hedonism.

When my wife and I go out to dine, I make a point of sharing the dish meant for one. She does not run and is nowhere near as concerned about caloric content as she is about her slim, thin figure. We always take home the leftovers. My weight for my thin body is still the same as in high school, college, grad school, and my career. Certainly, consistently running what has amounted to an hour a day has greatly aided that maintenance. And okay, I enjoy a good meal. Just not too close to a run.

Not certain from where I learned the art of enjoying a meal, letting the time pass gently with the company I keep, the food in front of me, and the knowledge that there is time for the other items on the daily list once I finish this immediate food sharing. Could have been from my dad, who never met a mealtime he couldn't extend. I learned the fine art of letting the food digest at the table, while an adult beverage was consumed. Perhaps I learned slowing down with the meal from my mama, who was not about to leave the table once she sat down. She had prepared and served the meal and by gum she was not getting up for your particularly small issue until she was good and well finished.

Upon reflection, I brought all that I've learned and read to my dining table, wherever may be that table. Breaking bread with friends, lunch with business associates, or dining with my spouse require a quality of time, conversation, and commitment to listening. Of course, gulping down a dog and fries with a soda or beer at a game venue doesn't get lost in all of this. That type of eating is a whole 'nother napkin assortment.

The breakfast following the weekly post-weekend long run is perhaps my favorite meal of the week. What used to be a "20" miler is now 10. Takes the same amount of time. That I run these weekender long runs solo no longer concerns me. My running companions will start with me, and just as soon as we've taken our first running steps, they have disappeared from my view. I know the route, having run each of our routes too many times to count over the last two decades.

Each route has the go-to breakfast haunt for the after-run meal. Because the runs start in the early mornings, our restaurants of choice are for breakfast. Lattes, water, eggs, pancakes, (grits), vegetable omelets, pastries, and on and on. None of us are cheated in what we order, I am the one ordering more than the rest. They know that my appetite differs, my intake is greater, and I am thinner than almost all of them. There are two in our running clan that are thinner, but they don't eat really. We dine together and remain at the table with each other until the first has to leave because of a weekend errand. Then, we drift away, satiated and satisfied from our morning's effort and recovery, only to do it all again next week and the week after that.

At least twice a year over the last 15 years or so, we have traveled together to distant cities and towns to run different races. Dining amidst people we don't know, seeking sites we don't take for granted as we would back home, those are my favorite meals with my closest friends. Once we've concluded the dance in picking a destination

race, we get down to choosing the experiences we want to add to our race running, and the dining establishments in which we are willing to partake. Most times, we hit a home run. There is the occasional whiff, but that happens. A run down hole in the wall of a dining choice turns out to be a five-star experience. Restaurants that we expect being ho hum, are so good that we go back once if not two more times in our short stay.

Late November weather, when I'm running in sub-freezing temperatures with headwinds for the first time since early spring always brings back the fleeting moment of perfection on a running trip I did solo. It was a "business" trip in early spring to a town north of us. The business was mine, and mine alone. After two decades of failing in the attempt for a Boston Marathon qualifying time, I had succeeded when I least expected. My wife was not happy that I had driven two hours, stayed one night away from home, run a marathon when I said I would no longer run a marathon, and come home to tell her I'd actually qualified, before telling her I needed to run another one for a faster finishing time because getting under my age-group qualifying time wouldn't get me in.

Four months later, I found myself alone in the next marathon, dining at a quiet local restaurant, with unexpectedly great cuisine, a fine wait staff, and other patrons who took an interest in my story. As I was leaving, after my two-hour meal, the owner suggested that were I to achieve my goal the next morning I should come back to tell all of them. I did. But first, I had to follow through on my race plan. The marathon had pacers, but not for my in between pace. I raced alone until the last five miles, clicking off the mile splits needed to improve my qualifying time. A pacer who was running a faster pace had lost all of his ardent followers; each having lost his pace. "Hey, Red," let 's do this! What time to do you need?" I was wearing a red long-sleeved shirt. I mumbled a response. "We're on that pace! Let's go, Red!" and, we did just that, with me pushing hard and him yelling, cheering, cajoling me to the finish. Thanking him buying him a beer and a race shirt, I left the race site victorious.

Arriving at the restaurant without a reservation, the owner and staff gently inquired as to whether I had succeeded. Informing that I had indeed, the cheers breaking out should have shattered glass. They sat me down, feted me, fawned over me, thrilled for me, and to have me. The owner, over my protests, said my meal and drink were on his house. I confirmed moving my flight home to a later time. The sharing of food and drink was going to take a while. A long while.