

## Twenty Six and Change

“And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you”  
Frederick Nietzsche

For some runners, the marathon distance is a pedigree, a high level entry on an athletic resume. For others it stands as a statement of intent; a way to broadcast their purpose beyond the scope of their immediate circle. A finisher's shirt as Holy Grail drives their quest. And for those that have made the distance a regular exercise, the numbers 26.2 can play the role of personal artifact displaying all that need be said about the person.

While there are as many relationships to the distance as there are participants I would suggest that the event, the race, the vary historicity of The Marathon is not simply an education, a direction or anecdotal fodder for cocktail party conversation. It may be serve those in part but beyond that the marathon is a private conversation with your self, a place where a constellation of feelings surface from some place that you'd not been in contact with since you were a child at Christmas and unchained emotions followed you around like a lost dog.

Running pundits have claimed that finally competing in a marathon may close a chapter to your running career. But when it's done, it's never done. The distance can commit Grand Theft Soul and the memories come back to you as unheralded images on a momentary breeze, lapping at your conscious and pulling you out of the present. Once you have joined that club the benefits go on long past the cramping calves.

I suppose that it starts with an idea or perhaps better said, an idealism—you have this concept of you living your life to a higher standard as edified in a certificate on the wall or a plaque in your office. It doesn't matter what the words say just so long as there are those three numbers separated by a dot—26.2--and your name. That object would inform your daily decisions and the passersby who'd glance at it. Your ideal thought is that they wouldn't ask about the time or the training or the place—they would just know that you had something non-marathoners didn't.

That's how it starts.

That's where the idea moves out of the shadow and strains toward reality. That's where the pain and the pleasure meet for the first time like they were old friends.

As you prepare for a marathon, whether it's the sore legs, sun burn, the incessant slap, slap of shoes on pavement or the falling asleep at 6 P.M. you will forget the ideal as the idea itself is watered down mutates into a "what-was-I-thinking?" notion. Training hurts. Bloody nipples are not very attractive. But as with anything that draws and drives you beyond any clear and cogent reason, you know that there are things beyond reason, rewards that rationale cannot explain. And so you plow ahead, mile after mile, week after week, band aid after band aid.

You are in a voluntary state of escape and are being pulled toward the distance like a beacon. You have a choice but not really. People tell you things like, "You'll get out of it what you put into it." "You'll never forget that last 100 yards." "You'll find your limits as well as your center." And for the most part they are true. If you allow it, training for a marathon can creep into the cracks of your mind like a Trojan horse. It may cause fear or fantasy, anticipation or anxiety, doubt or delight. But it will always and already cause you to wonder.

You'll wonder if you've done enough. Are my shoes too tight? What if I have to walk? Will I qualify for Boston? Can I really get cramps in my toes? There will be a waterfall of what-ifs but few will dare take you over the edge. The eclectic feelings may both thrill and grab you by the throat. Running a marathon is playing childhood games in an adult body. It is doing something great in your own small way. But you don't know that just yet.

There's that small matter of completion.

Standing on the starting line of a marathon is like being forced to write your own elegy in the third grade. How can you know until you know? There is this great big box laid out in front of you. Did it belong to Midas or Pandora? Will it embrace you or swallow you? You see others yawning with quote marks around their eyes as if they'd seen it all before and you know that the pavement is awash with everyday heroes. Some of them just don't know it yet. And when the gun is fired there is suddenly a kind of order to an unordered world. You smile to yourself because it's all over but for those next few hours. And that matter of 26.2 miles.

In the middle there is the run. And that's for you.

I always cringe when I hear the experts detailing what others will feel during an endurance sport event. "It's gonna hurt. You'll have to push through it, become a better person...blah, blah." Most are well-intended, of course. But you never know. A lot can happen in (enter time standard here) hours. Everyone comes into the event different and everyone takes something different away. It's not so much getting out of it what you put into it as it is that you have no place to hide. You're stuck with yourself and

your thoughts. That's the beauty of a long struggle—you realize things. After I ran my first marathon at twenty years old I realized that watering my Chia Pet was the beginning of adult responsibility. Perhaps someone else figured out how to sell the Pet Rock at mile 22 or came dangerously close to the cure for cancer at mile 24.

But you'll never know unless you go through yourself into the abyss.

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The completion of a marathon carries a kind of raw reality. The initial celebration if followed by a melancholy fog and a realization that if you let it, your first marathon could only be itself and can never anything else. You don't want to be continually sleeping with yesterday but damn that was a lot of fun. Wasn't it? You will seal off the pain and the blisters with a cocky nonchalance. Each day the cramps get thinner and the strides get wider. You will purposely and thankfully sabotage your memory of anything bad. Repression and selective memory lower times and finish places like fish stories.

And that's not a bad thing. You've done something substantial.

The running philosopher, George Sheehan, once said that, "Our highest human need is to be hero; we are here to lead a heroic life." Running a marathon won't make you a hero in the folkloric sense of the term. But it just might give you some time to think about your own place in the world. Finishing a marathon won't give you material rights and privileges. But beyond those months of training, weeks of fear and hours of competing there are years of consideration. You did it for a reason. And your twenty six point two miles is firmly situated in its own history, a past that is intimately linked to your own present.

And I suppose that if you let it, that finisher's medal draped over the door knob might stand vigil to the shaping of your future.

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