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In running and in life, one foot in front of the other

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Young Voices

I began running when my husband and I were both in college in Boston. I was terribly frightened of failure and rarely took on a challenge I was not certain that I could accomplish. In many ways, I am still surprised I stuck with it. The first time I ran in the rain was one of the most vivid, invigorating experiences of my life. It was midweek after work. We had already put on running clothes and sighed "oh well" when we realized the weather was not going to hold out. I hate being caught in the rain -- having my pants stick to the back of my legs, the surprising drop that slips onto my neck, and especially having my thick curly hair huge and wet for the rest of the day. However, some ordinary fall evening in Boston, I gave in and embraced cold misting weather, feeling strong, fast and more fully alive.

By being present in the moment and letting go of all the stressors of the day, running gives me the opportunity to pay attention to my breathing, posture and the amazing scenery around me, quite similar to my experiences of prayer. "Many runners are familiar with experiences of peace, ecstasy and profundity, just to name a few, which are actually spiritual experiences," writes Harita Davies on Write Spirit. When I am running, I find myself more centered, and this influences not only the present, but the rest of the day as well.

By running, we expand our capacity, knowledge of the self and our role in the world. I have found that running allows me to remember to just keep putting one foot in front of the other. I learn to break up large tasks into smaller, more measurable goals: "I will run until I get to that tree ahead"; "I have already done two miles, what's one more?"; or "I can do ANYTHING for 30 more seconds."

I am reminded that I am capable of so much more than I credit myself. I recently signed up for my first half-marathon with my three sisters, all of whom have already run at least one half. They keep saying, "You can do this. You will surprise yourself." I think they are right. I run because I continue to surprise

myself by how much my capacity expands. I have learned that running is a mental game; my mind believes that I have to stop much earlier than my body would fail me.

When I gave birth to my son, the labor offered more pain than I thought I could endure, but I trusted in the preparation and focused on doing only the very next thing. Honestly, I got to a point in labor where I continued forward not because of bravery, but because I was in it and there was nothing else I could do but push. So it goes some of the time in running. One step at a time, I will finish the next race.

I am not alone in desiring to call myself an endurance athlete without living in the gym. According to Running USA, "Since 2003, the half-marathon has been the fastest growing road race distance in the United States, and for six consecutive years (2006-11), the number of 13.1 mile finishers has grown by 10% or more each year. No other U.S. road distance comes close to this growth rate during the Second Running Boom (circa 1994)." I find distance running a particularly spiritual experience, as for most it is hard to put in the hours on a treadmill. The miles must be run outside and at least for me, more time outside grounds me and strengthens my relationship with my Creator. The distance puts me into a meditative state, the repetition of my feet hitting the pavement becomes my prayer beads.

Most profoundly, I find a regular routine that includes running keeps me sitting in a place of gratitude more than any other physical exercise. I am grateful for the beauty of my surroundings, and as my thoughts turn to my family and work, the gratitude spills over into all areas of my life. As I encounter my fellow runners throughout my day, others who have created a place of peaceful stillness for themselves in the morning hours, I recognize the blessing and irony in our communal monasticism.

Recently, I ran four miles at 6:30 a.m. because I mentioned to a couple of friends that I needed to get in a run before an upcoming 5K. I had never run that far, and was nervous. Not wanting to slow my friends down as we traversed the distance between two cities kept me moving forward. Afterward, we were joking that when we start our mornings this way, nothing the day throws at us can possibly get us down. We have already achieved greatness before our daily cup of coffee.

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